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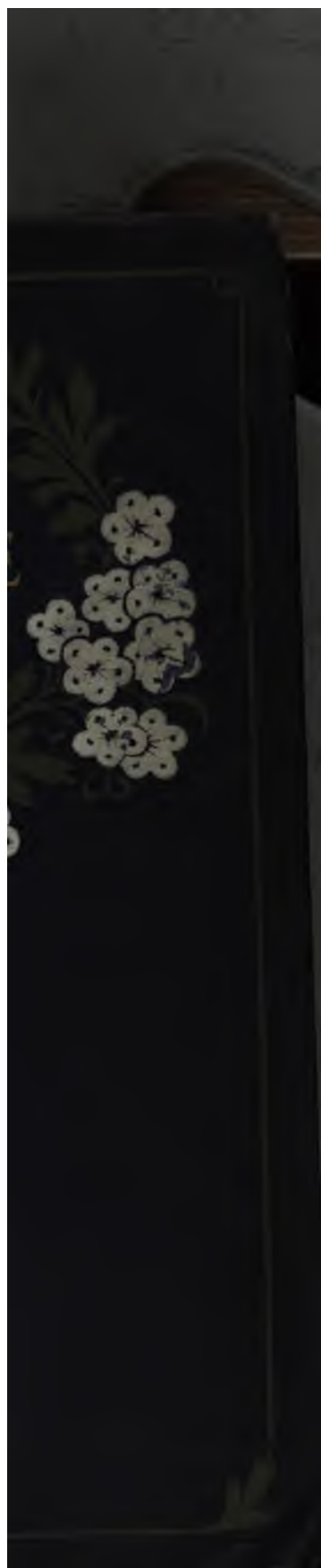
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BLITHE McBRIDE



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BLITHE McBRIDE

BY

BEULAH MARIE DIX

AUTHOR OF "SOLDIER RIGDALE" "A LITTLE CAPTIVE
LAD," "MERRYLIPS," ETC. ETC.

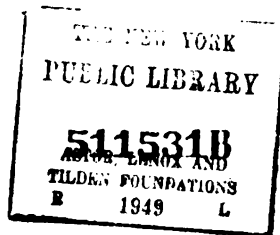
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BLITHE McBRIDE

CHAPTER I

A MAID ALONE

EARLY on an April evening, in the year of grace 1657, a little girl went up Crocker's Lane in Whitefriars. She carried an earthen jug, and she was going to fetch water from the conduit in Fleet Street. She never came back.

The little girl was called Blithe, because some one whom she had forgotten first had called her so, and McBride, because her uncle, with whom she dwelt, was Roaring Tim McBride. She could not have told her age, for she did not know her birthday, but she looked to be twelve years old, or maybe thirteen. She was a slender, gipsyish creature, brown-haired, brown-eyed, brown-skinned, in a shabby, torn gown of russet, and a petticoat of faded scarlet, with heavy brogans on her bare feet, and a kerchief of scarlet bound above her hair.

She lived in an old, dirty house, in an old, dirty

quarter of London. The walls of the dingy rooms were wainscotted with rare woods, and the broken balustrades were richly carved, but the gentlefolk who there had kept their state had long since passed away. In their stead the old house harboured Roaring Tim McBride and others of his sort, upright men, rufflers, priggers, and pad-ders, as they called themselves in their jargon, or, to name them in plain English, beggars, rogues, and thieves.

Among such people little Blithe McBride had grown to girlhood. Only twice had she escaped out of the grime of the London gutters. Then she had gone a-begging into the country, with a slatternly, good-natured woman, a walking mort, as she was called, who, to win pity from the charitable, made herself out to be a poor widow, and Blithe her child.

In the country Blithe had found that there were streams of pure, cool water, and hedgerows white with hawthorn, and birds that sang as they winged upward to the blue of the heavens. Always afterwards, when she felt the spring coming, even in the grey streets of London, she thought of the hawthorn, white in the hedgerows, and wanted to be clean.

Two people only in her life, besides the walking mort, who had died long since in the Bridewell,

Blithe had found to be kind. One was her cousin, Gerritt McBride, ten years her elder, a prigger of prancers, or horse-thief, who to save his neck from the law had fled across the seas and never returned. The other was her father's mother, old Granny McBride.

From the stalwart old woman Blithe had had in her day many a sharp correction, but, thanks to that same old woman, she had escaped much at the hands of others. From Granny she had learned to pray, and she had learned, too, that there were other ways of life than those that were followed in Crocker's Lane. In her youth Granny had been at service in the country.

"A decent woman was I, if ever was any," the poor soul insisted. "Thy mother, too, was a good woman," she would add. "Never forget that! And thou thyself art born belike for better things."

Child that she was, Blithe had scarcely realised through the years, all that the old woman had done for her. But now at last she began to realise. Only a short week before this April evening, the old woman had been laid in the churchyard, and from the moment that she was left alone, Blithe had fared ill. That very hour, while she went out to fetch water, she knew that her uncle, Roaring Tim, was planning with the

red-faced basket mort, the peddling woman from the north, to sell her as apprentice to a life of beggary and roguery. She was doomed, and she had no friend to whom she could turn for help. She thought of the may, white as innocence, in the hedgerows outside the town.

"So fain would I be clean!" she whispered.

The hour was twilight, and the weather lowery, with now and then a touch of rain. Blithe slipped along the darkling street, like a furtive, small cat, and gave the wall, whenever, as was not infrequent, she met a fellow who was reeling drunk. She had almost reached the conduit that was her goal, when as she rounded the corner into Fleet Street, she ran plump against a man, in the short, full breeches of a sailor, out a-strolling with a lass on either arm.

Against the triple onset even Blithe, for all her nimbleness that came of gutter rearing, was not proof. She kept her feet, but the earthen jug was shaken from her hand. It fell to the pavement, and was smashed into a dozen fragments.

Then, all at once, Blithe knew herself to be the most friendless maid in all the world, with Granny dead, and her brogans full of holes, and slavery of the meanest to be her portion, and her jug all in pieces, and a beating for the breakage sure to be her lot within the hour. She crooked her

elbow before her face, and like any maiden softly nurtured, instead of a poor, little waif of the streets, she fell a-weeping.

"Why, maidie, what's this to-do about a broken jug?" cried a hearty voice beside her.

Blithe looked up, streaming-eyed, into the red face of the sailor's lass who bent above her.

"My jug, 'tis broken," whimpered Blithe, sadly belying her name. "I'll be soundly beat."

"Give her a ha' penny, and let us shog!" cried the other lass.

But she who first had spoken signed to her to be silent.

"Hast thou no heart o' pity?" she cried. "Marry, poor child, I'm fain to comfort thee."

"Comfort? Thou?" said the sailor, and he laughed.

"Hold thy peace!" the woman snapped at him, while she laid a kind hand, but strong, on Blithe's shoulder.

"Heed him not, poppet," she bade, "but come wi' me into yon tavern, and warm thee and cheer thee and tell me all thy woes."

Blithe hesitated. Shrewdly versed in the ways of London streets, she distrusted the woman, yet whom had she now in all the world to trust?

"Yea, I will come," she said.



CHAPTER II

SAWKIN OF DEVON

WITH her hand in the stranger's hand, Blithe went down a steep lane, and by some slippery stairs, and then by three several alleys, and along a darksome quay. Indeed, Blithe told herself, "yon tavern" was far afield, and the hand that held hers gripped fast and hard. Yet she went, because she was willing to go.

All the way through the twilight the woman was talking, over-fast and over-much.

"And how old art thou, sweetheart? I' fak-ins, a well-grown lass for thy years, and a to-wardly hand, I'll be sworn, at housewifery! Canst dress a dish o' meat, I doubt not, ay, or tend upon a bairn. And thou art feared of a beating, poor heart! Unmannerly they must use thee. Hast an evil stepdame, perchance? Or art left an orphan to harsh guardians? Or art thou a foundling, maybe? Well, well, belike in the world are folk would know how to use a young, brisk wench more handsomely."

Much more of the same Blithe listened to, while she hurried with her guide through the mirky lanes. As she listened, she could not help smiling, though at the same time she felt her heart beat fast, not only with a sense of adventure to come, but with a hope that slowly dawned.

At length, when they were in a part of the town that lay quite outside Blithe's own straitened bounds, they turned in, the woman and Blithe, at a narrow door, where an ill-kept lantern blinked through the mist. They entered a half-lighted and heavy-smelling room, in what seemed to be a tavern of the baser sort.

"Hey, Tom Tapster!" cried the woman, to a red-nosed fellow, in a soiled apron. "Bring a milk posset, and with speed, for this young maid, who is weary and a-cold."

"And for thee, also, milk posset?" grinned the fellow.

Blithe did not need to catch the glance that passed between them. Bred in the streets, she knew already into what hands she had let herself fall.

"Good mistress," she said, with a flash of smile on her thin, brown face, that was like the flash of sunlight on amber water, "will ye not bestow the ¹ shells on bread and cheese or stewed flesh? For

¹ Money.

indeed I am hungered. And of a drugged posset, assure you is here no need."

Then who should fall a-laughing but the red-nosed tapster, and who should strike an attitude of surprise but the woman, in her draggled petticoat, with her blowzy hair?

"Drugged posset, quotha? And what doth the wench prate of?" she cried.

"¹ Stow you, bene mort!" said Blithe, in the thieves' jargon. "I am no ² tame dell, I."

"Thou hast it, Sawkin," spoke the tapster, and tittered.

"Did ye think I knew you not for what ye are?" said Blithe, composedly. She sat down, as she spoke, on the bench farthest from the door, and smiled up at the woman, in friendly fashion. "Ye are of those, and they are many, that lure young boys and girls, ay, and older folk, too, that they should sell themselves to service in the plantations, and more than a ³ make have ye from the shipmaster to whom ye deliver such."

For a moment the woman called Sawkin hesitated, as if half angry. Then she set her hands on her hips and laughed.

"Wellawell!" she said. "An old hand like me to be thus coggel! But cat eateth not kind.

¹ Be still, good woman.

² Housekept maiden.

³ Ha'penny.

Taste thy legs, thou shrewd atomy! Run home to thy kin!"

"Good mistress!" cried Blithe, and now she spoke fast and frightened. "Indeed, ye do not take my meaning. With all my heart I'm fain to be gone, whither ye purposed of cozenage to send me."

Again Sawkin hesitated, while with one hand she rumpled her untidy hair. Then, somewhat tartly, as if she did a kindness in spite of herself, she bade Tom Tapster bring quickly a dish of stewed mutton and a loaf of bread.

"Thou shalt not go empty, wherever thou goest," she spoke presently, as she seated herself opposite Blithe at the grimy table. "That much will I do, for the sake of the lass I once was in the lanes of Devon."

"Was there hawthorn grew in the hedgerows?" Blithe asked wistfully.

Sawkin put down the knife with which she had carved for herself, and liberally.

"Child," she asked, "why wilt thou be gone unto the plantations?"

"Because," Blithe answered, "my old granny now is dead, and I shall be beaten at home, and my cousin, the prigger of prancers, hath gone thither aforetime, and he was ever kind to me."

Swiftly she named the reasons that were of

least weight. The real reason she kept hidden. How should she say to such a one as blowzy Sawkin that she was eager to live honestly and be clean?

"These are good reasons, in sooth," spoke Sawkin. "Marry, why shouldst thou not of free will to the plantations, when an hour ago I would 'a' helped thee thither willy-nilly?"

"Ay, wherefore not?" said Blithe, almost too sorely tossed between fear and hope properly to relish her mutton.

"Only it seemeth against nature, thou to go willing." Sawkin shook her head. "Yet will I chance it, and thou, Tom Tapster, behold how Sawkin of Devon doth for once kindness to a young lass, and defenceless."

"A sign and a wonder," grinned the tapster, "and will be talked over long after I be laid in coffin."

"Hold thy peace, worm!" cried Sawkin, but to Blithe she spoke kindly. "It falleth aptly, lass. There lieth at Tower Stair a goodly ship, the *Trial*, that if the breeze hold will sail at dawn with the tide. A stout ship, and the master, Jack Nawn, known to me aforetime. I will make interest with him to carry thee overseas."

Wisely Blithe smiled, though she kept silent. Of a truth, she thought, presently Sawkin, if she

kept on in this strain, would be charging her money for the great favour that she did her, in selling her into service.

"Ay, happy thou art," Sawkin nodded, "so to fall into kind hands. A stout ship, a yare master, and thy goal the goodly plantation of the Virginias, where gold and pearl do so abound, and the silly savages heap skins of beaver at thy lily feet, and oranges o' the sun and grapes as big as damsons hang above thy head, ripe for the plucking. Ay, happy thou, my girl! 'Tis a land of peace and plenteousness whither I shall help thee."

Then, in a different tone, Sawkin bade:

"Pocket thou up the remnant of the bread lieth there. How knowest thou for sure when next thou shalt munch?"

Now this last speech rang to Blithe's ear kindly and sensible, while that which went before had sounded mere words. Little Blithe knew of the English plantations beyond seas, but she judged that they were no Fools' Paradise, such as the crimp had given them to be. Prudently she put the crusts of bread into her pocket, and then she rose, and followed Sawkin of Devon out into the dark.

CHAPTER

IN THE DA

THE mist had thickened
Blithe and Sawkin
Through the down
showed faint and sulky. Unclean
foul with slime.

Slipping in her worn brogue
along at her companion's side,
she knew that the fire of adventure
quenched in her. She thought of
Crocker's Lane almost as a haunt
its wastrel crew, gathered about
as friends.

What was that song that
the North had sung of old by the

"Oh, little did my mother
The day she cradled me
The lands that I should
The death that I should

"Bene mort!" she faltered, though even before she made her prayer, she judged it vain, for how should such as Sawkin of Devon spend money for a dish of meat, and gain no profit thereby?

But vain or not, Blithe never breathed her prayer to be let run home, for just at that moment, in the street on which the cut-throat lane that they followed opened, rose a hideous din.

"'Tis the ¹ harman beks!" Blithe whispered.

Together Blithe and Sawkin clung, there in the darkness of the lane, while they saw pass along the street, in the glare of lanterns that the watchmen bore, a crew of gaping 'prentices, serving-maids, and idle folk, and in their midst the constable, who lugged along a white-faced lad, with desperate eyes.

In a moment's time the rabble had passed, and the white young face was swallowed up in darkness.

Shivering, Blithe cowered at Sawkin's side.

"Didst mark him?" she asked through chattering teeth. "Scarce more than a ² kynchin coe, and to be whipped at the cart's tail his best hope. I ha' seen 'em stripped and whipped, lads no older than he, ay, and wenches, too."

"Ay, wenches, too," whispered Sawkin, and

¹ Constables.

² Little boy.

through all her body shuddered. "Who knoweth better than I?"

Blithe plucked at her hand.

"Let us hastel!" she begged. "'Tis a cruel town, is ¹ Romvile. Whatever befall overseas, the plantations cannot use a body more hardly."

"Sayest truly!" vowed Sawkin. "Westward ho is the word."

Through the driving rain and the darkness they slipped and shuffled for another dim half mile, and then, by a noisome alley, entered a pot-house that was even baser than the one where they had supped. But with the din of the watch still echoing in her ears, and the vision of that doomed young face before her eyes, Blithe went forward now, as brave as her name.

In a close chamber, behind the taproom, they found Jack Nawn, the master of the good ship *Trial*. A broad, hairy creature, in layers of coats with many buttons and a knitted seaman's cap, he sat drinking wine with a crony, as broad and as hairy as himself.

"Bide 'ee there!" commanded Sawkin, briskly, so Blithe shrank into a corner, where she watched and listened.

Greeting, loud and none too civil, passed between Sawkin and the shipmen. Then, across the

¹ London.

table, puddled with spilt wine, Sawkin leaned and whispered.

Soon her voice rose high:

"A sober, well-lessoned wench, thou dost ask? I tell 'ee, Master Nawn, 'tis mine own sister's child, soberly bred, the apple of her eye, skilled in all housewifery—"

"Enough, enough!" roared Nawn. "So sayest thou of every thievish draggletail thou fob'st on me. Come into the light, thou, last of our sister's children!"

Blithe came, and bobbed him a courtesy.

"A lanky lass," he said. "She'll eat me twice her worth upon the passage."

"Good sir," spoke Blithe, "indeed I have no appetite. Give me but bread and water."

"What else hadst looked for? There are no cates for such as thou aboard the *Trial*."

Blithe fronted him steadily.

"Nor elsewhere, have I found," she answered.

Nawn knitted his brows and eyed her sourly, but she did not flinch. Of a sudden he turned to Sawkin.

"I'll stow her aboard," he said. "There's ten shillings will quit thee."

Sawkin lifted her hands and her eyes to Heaven, protesting. She was a poor woman, a poor, honest woman, and this her sister's child, the apple

of her eye. Could not his worship tell down fifteen shillings, and win a blessing?

"Ten shillings, or none," said Nawn, and filled his cup, indifferently.

Sawkin took the money, with a curse upon him, at which he only laughed.

"Good speed to thee, wench, in a den of thieves!" she tossed the words to Blithe, and with the money clutched in her hand, scurried from the room.

"Sit thee down!" bade Nawn. "Mind thy manners, and no ill shall befall thee."

So Blithe huddled herself into the far corner of the farthest bench, and waited, wide-eyed, till the wine was drunk and the shot was paid. Then Nawn bade:

"Come thy ways!"

Forth they went, by a black, rotting stair that plunged from the rear of the house into the black water of the river that was all a-curdle under the rain.

At the foot of the stair waited two sailors with a boat, into which Nawn stumbled, cursing. Blithe, scrambling after him, curled herself in the bow. She felt the planks clammy wet beneath her hands, and she shivered, but not altogether from cold.

Sullenly the oars slashed the inky water.

Wedging through the blackness, the boat lay to at last beside the lowering hulk of a darksome ship. Out of the darkness hung a worn ladder of ropes. Up it swarmed Master Nawn, surprisingly nimble for one of his bulk, and, with a little prayer for protection, after him crept Blithe.

Over a bulwark she tumbled, and set foot on the main deck of the good ship *Trial*.

"Here, thou, Deptford Robin!" cried Nawn, with a jovial oath. "Show this piece of Eve's flesh where to bestow herself."

So saying, Nawn walked aft, and Blithe stood alone in the rain upon the slopping deck. Not yet had she a sight of this Robin, who should find her shelter. She stood quite alone in the dark.

Then, in the moment when her courage was at the lowest ebb, she chanced to shift her position from behind the mast that had screened her, and she saw that a beam of light streamed from the window of the great cabin. Following with her eyes up the beam of light, she saw through the little window a woman, in a flowered bedgown, with soft hair loosened about her grave and tender face, who paced the cabin, hushing a little child who nestled in her arms.

Faintly, faintly Blithe heard the words that the woman crooned:



"Sleep, pretty babe, and cease to weep!
The good Lord guard thee in thy sleep."

Blithe folded her chilled hands, as the dead woman, Granny McBride, had taught her to do.

"Mayhap the Lord will guard me," she whispered, comforted.

CHAPTER IV,

FLOTSAM

OUT of the dark a sailor trod catlike. Deptford Robin, Blithe judged that he must be.

"Drenched as a kitling, beest thou not?" he spoke, roughly, yet not unkindly. "Come thou below! Shalt have a board to thy bed, and a bit o' sacking to thy coverlet. Ay, royal cheer thou'lt have aboard the *Trial*."

"I have not lain ere this in beds of down," Blithe answered cheerily.

The sailor opened his mouth as if to reply, but stood speechless. Blithe, with ear no less keen than his, had also caught the sound. No splash of the sullen water it was, but a choked and sobbing cry, and it came from beneath the side of the ship.

"Good 'ild us!" breathed Blithe.

She could not believe that mermen and water-dogs had their haunts so near to London, and yet, in this world that was new to her, she felt that any marvel might be possible.

But Deptford Robin already had snatched up a rope that lay coiled at hand. With it he stepped to the bulwark.

"Catch, thou!" he spoke guardedly into the darkness. A moment later he bade, "Work thy way to starboard, craftily, lad! Time is thine. Thou'lt soon hit on the foot o' the ladder."

"What will it be?" asked Blithe, close at his side.

"How should I ken?" the sailor answered her. "Strange flotsam the tides bring."

Then he leaned over the bulwark, and reached his hand to the slight figure that crawled, dripping and panting, up the side of the ship.

"Hold fast!" he bade. "By this light, I caught thee but in time!"

So saying, he dragged across the bulwark a shivering lad, scarcely taller than Blithe herself. So much was to be made out in the darkness, before the lad dropped, a sobbing heap, upon the streaming deck.

"Wellawell!" quoth Deptford Robin composedly, as he coiled his rope afresh. "Here's salt water enow a'ready. No need thou to add there-to!"

But Blithe was bending over one whom she judged to be more wretched than herself.

"Nay, take heart!" she counselled. "Now thou art safe."

"Safe?" the boy wailed in answer. "How can I be safe?"

Then in the dark he struggled to his knees and caught at Deptford Robin's hand.

"O master!" he besought, in a desperate whisper, "wilt thou not of pity hide me till we be at sea? I must out of England. My very life doth hang thereon. Oh, in the name of pity, and Heaven's mercy!"

"And what sculduddery hast done a'land?" spoke Deptford Robin, quite unmoved.

"No knavery, I swear!" came the frantic whisper. "I am 'prentice to a butcher in Smithfield, a heavy-handed rogue. And my parents are dead. And he hath beat me sorely for no fault of mine. Canst thou not see how my doublet is rent, and my shoulder bruised and black wi' the handling he hath given me? This hour I fled from him. I would overseas. O master! I' the name o' mercy, hide me! Hide me!"

"A good tale," said Deptford Robin. "I ha' heard it afore. Hast any coin about thee?"

The lad sank back upon the deck.

"I ha' naught." His voice broke upon the words.

"But in the plantations his time could be sold, even as mine," urged Blithe. "Belike Master Nawn, if he know thereof—"

She had made but a single step, scarcely knowing that she made it, in her zeal, when Deptford Robin caught her arm in no gentle grasp.

"Stow thy gab!" he bade. "'Tis the last thing will please the master, to be acknown on't, here and now."

Then, as one half-wearied, he spoke to the boy:

"Up wi' thee, coney-catcher! Belike of charity I'll find thee hiding place."

"Heaven quit thee!" prayed the lad.

"None else will, forsooth!" retorted Deptford Robin. "Come thou below! And thou, too, wench," he added, to Blithe. "Thou canst not linger here the night, else crank questions may be asked. Yarely now, ye both!"

Down a steep ladder they scrambled, into a darkling sort of pit, set round with casks and boxes, and smelling of bilge-water. Barely in time they were.

"Robin! Hey, rogue of Deptford!" bellowed a voice from above deck.

"Lie close and be mum!" bade the sailor, and leaped up the ladder.

Under the dim light of the low-burning lantern that swayed above them, Blithe had a good

look at the lad, before they shrank, by common impulse, into the darkest corner. She saw him a well-knit boy of perhaps fourteen, in bedraggled garments and tattered hose, with short-cropped yellow hair, and in his white, young face blue eyes that were wide and desperate.

"Oh!" whispered Blithe, instantly remembering. "I ha' seen thee ere now, and this same night."

"Thou hast not!" he panted.

She put out her hand in the gloom, and clutched his hand that was shaking.

"The harman beks," she whispered. "I saw thee—brother! Indeed, 'twas almost along o' the sight o' thee I am come upon this venture."

He held her hand fast in both his.

"Thou wilt not blab?"

"By the ¹ Salamon, no!" she promised. "How was it? Tell me!"

"'Twas partly truth I told yon fellow," he whispered brokenly. "I was 'prentice, but to a saddler, hard by Paul's. A West Country lad, I am. My name is Gilbert Vaughan. My father died in the wars. My mother, too, is dead. Mine uncle had me bound apprentice. 'Twas not a year since. One day I lingered in a tavern, to watch them play at Lowls. In the press I was

¹ Mass.

robbed of twenty shillings in coin of my master's that I bore. I durst not back to him and tell o' the loss. Two days I beat the streets. Then I fell in with companions."

He shuddered.

"Ay," said Blithe. "Of what sort I know. Thou needest not to tell me."

"This night," he said, "they sent me forth to cut a purse in the throng about the ballad-monger's stall. But I was unhandy, and they took me in the deed." Tearlessly he sobbed. "They will hang me. 'Tis the law. Yon sailor fellow—he will betray me."

Blithe put her arm about his shaken shoulders. Twelve years she had lived in the streets of London to his twelve months.

"Thou wilt not ¹ trine the cheates," she said calmly. "Thou art worth more to the shipmen, living, in the plantations, than delivered over to the harman bek. Take courage and look cheerly. All shall yet be well."

But stoutly though she spoke for his comfort, she could not help looking anxiously toward the ladder. Creaking down it that moment came Deptford Robin, and with him, as she knew, came weal or woe for Gilbert Vaughan.

¹ Hang.

CHAPTER V

ABOARD THE TRIAL

TAKE courage," bade Deptford Robin, "and take cover!"

Under the grudging light of the smoke-stained lantern, he revealed himself, a limber ruffian, of uncertain age, with eyes not altogether unkindly. As he spoke, he laid a hand on Gilbert's shoulder.

"I'll speedily back and bestow thee, brother!" he promised. "Ay, and snugly, where none shall light on thee till we be many leagues from the land, beshrew it for a place o' perils! For now," he turned to Blithe, "tread at my heels, wench, and remember, thou hast this night seen and heard naught."

"I take thee," said Blithe, and to Gilbert she spoke cheerily, "Nay, fear not! Even as I told thee, all will be well."

From her heart she spoke the words. Shrewd beyond her years, with the training that she had had in the streets, she suspected that Deptford Robin had laid heads together with Master Nawn,

and that it was with the master's full knowledge and assent that Gilbert was to be sheltered aboard the *Trial*, until the hour when he should be sold, to the master's profit, in the plantations. Well, better servitude in the plantations than almost certain death in London!

With a feeling that Gilbert's affairs were ordered for the best, and her own as well as could be expected, Blithe followed Deptford Robin among bales and casks and chests of merchandise, to a low door, that opened on a short ladder. At the foot of the ladder were dimness and thick air, in which figures stirred uneasily, much as in the cellar pits of the city that were to Blithe no unknown country.

"Here lie thy mates," said Deptford Robin. "To them, lass, and good rest be thine!"

Down trundled Blithe into the pit, and stumbled against a form that scolded her roundly in a woman's voice, with a burr to it that made her think of the basket mort from the north. Stepping quickly aside, Blithe unluckily set foot on another shape that straightway fell a-weeping.

"Fine manners, troth," spoke one from the dark. "Couch thou and sleep, and let thy betters rest!"

The woman who first had scolded suddenly laid a hand on Blithe and drew her down.

"Art young to be of this fellowship," the woman said roughly. "Shalt have a corner o' my coverlet for this one night, though it be but ragged."

"I thank you kindly, mistress," Blithe answered civilly, and, nestling beneath the worn coverlet, in this strange, dim place, was presently, to her own surprise, asleep.

Once in the dark she woke, and wondered where she was, and wondered the more, as she harked to the scuffling of feet above her, and the creak of a windlass. She wondered, too, why it was that the floor on which she lay should be so strangely all a-joggle. Then she remembered that she was no longer in the house on Crocker's Lane, but aboard the good ship *Trial*, with the old life far behind her, and again, much comforted, she slept.

When next she woke, the planks on which she lay were heaving dizzily, and in the mirky daylight she made out that of the score of grown girls and young women round her half were sick and groaning. But the North Country wench, whose coverlet she had shared, was alert and hearty. Joan Shoreham was her name, she told Blithe, while they two were smoothing their hair and shaking out their crumpled petticoats.

Presently Blithe and Joan and a half-dozen

more rose up stiffly, at a bawled order from a sailor in the doorway, and went unsteadily upon the orlop deck, and so by a ladder to the main deck and the cook's galley.

The same deck, this, where Blithe had stood the night before in desolate blackness, but now she stepped upon it, dumb with delight, as one who entered a new world of promise. For the rain had passed with the night. Over her head she saw blue sky and great sails white against it, and on either hand blue waves that dipped and made their manners to the good ship speeding westward. A gay day! A brave day! Blithe felt that she could have danced for joy upon the swaying deck.

"Oh, 'tis bonny weather!" she cried to Joan, and she smiled on Deptford Robin, who was splicing a rope near by.

"Didst rest well?" he questioned, with a grin.

"Like a queen," vowed Blithe.

Then with the other wenches, who were not so gay, she found herself herded to the cook's galley, where thin porridge was served to them, not too bountifully, in wooden bowls. She heard her companions grumble at the nipping wind, and the fearsome waves, and the vile fare, and to be rid of them, she stepped a little aside, behind the great mast. She meant to drink her porridge

in peace, while she looked upon the gladsome waves at their buffets, and thought of the new, clean life to which she was speeding. But with the bowl halfway to her lips, she stopped and stared.

Not twenty paces from her, in a sheltered corner, where the poop-deck reared itself from the main deck, two gentlewomen were cosily established with rugs and cushions, and with them was the little child that Blithe had seen the night before in the cabin. Eagerly she looked to see if either of the gentlewomen were the one that she had seen then singing to the child, and, having seen, had not forgotten. But she found that both these two were strangers.

The one was a square-built woman of fifty odd, with a purple woollen hood drawn over her curch and half hiding her reddened face, and a great scarlet cloak above her homespun gown, and a great green whittle worn above her cloak, so that she seemed as broad almost as she was long. The other was a languid girl of fifteen or sixteen, in a silken hood and a cloak of perpetuana, lined with watered tabby, who was eating what seemed sweetmeats from a little filigreed box.

Even while Blithe looked, the woman rose to her feet, with some effort, and waddled, as her gait is best described, with all her wrappings



round her, into the great cabin. The young girl went on eating her sweetmeats. She was very pretty, thought Blithe, with fair hair and delicate skin, quite the fine lady, and, like many a fine lady, with a peevish droop to her lips.

At the girl's side the little child sat unnoticed. Once she put out a small, dimpled hand and touched the girl's elbow, while she pointed to a white gull overhead, but, with a pettish movement, the girl shook off the little hand. Then the child rose and, unheeded by her companion, toddled a step or two upon the deck.

Blithe watched the uncertain steps, adoring. Never had she seen such a darling two-year-old, all pink cheeks and ruddy curls, in a fine laced cap and pinner, and little coats of watchet blue. "Will she stray toward me, perhaps?" thought Blithe, with her porridge quite cold and forgotten.

Then, to her horror, Blithe saw that, while the young girl gave all her attention to the sweetmeats, the child was edging nearer and nearer to the bulwark.

"Mistress!" Blithe raised a timid voice of warning that was lost on the wind.

Then she had no time to give a second warning, for, with one of the swift and unlooked for movements that children make in their play, the

little one had plunged toward an unguarded opening in the bulwark. It was too small for a man's passage, but big enough for a child's, and below were the hungry waves. In that same moment Blithe had the child fast in her arms.

She heard a wail of terror from the little one, surprised by the rude grasp of a stranger, and then she heard voices all about her.

"What's here to do?" roared Master Nawn. "Keep thy hands from the gentry, thou jade, and thy place forward, where thou belongest, else thou'lt be scourged thither, with a wanion!"

"A forward wench!" lisped the young girl with the sweetmeats. "I had mine eyes upon Kitt all the while. She was safe indeed with me."

Looming in the distance, reappeared the broad woman, with the purple hood and the green whittle, but before this last comer could speak, Blithe simply fled away. With a sense that she was of all maids the most awkward, unhandy, and disgraced, she hid herself, breakfastless, in the dark of the bondwomen's quarters, and wished herself even back in Crocker's Lane.



CHAPTER VI

IN THE GREAT CABIN

FOR a long time, it seemed to Blithe, she sat huddled in the small corner that she perhaps might call her own, and wondered, with a big lump in her throat, how it happened that a while ago she had found the day fair.

Then came a harsh step on the ladder, and the voice of Deptford Robin:

"Where be'th she, the little brown wench that came last aboard?"

Blithe rose up, without waiting for any of her mates to curry favour by pointing her out.

"Here I be," she spoke, more stoutly than she felt.

"Come thy ways, then!" bade Deptford Robin. "Thou art called for in the great cabin."

"Wherefore?" Blithe faltered.

The sailor's answer was enough to kill her courage.

"None ask wherefore aboard the *Trial* when Master Nawn doth summon."

"Oh, good guide us!" Blithe moaned to herself. "I would I were back in Crocker's Lane

indeed, and mine uncle, Roaring Tim, the worst I had to fear."

But she made her moan to herself, and meantime followed at Deptford Robin's heels. Whatever were the faults of the McBrides, cowardice was not among them.

Up to the main deck once again they clambered, where the shouldering waves and the great, white sails had now no lure for Blithe. Past the silken-hooded girl, who nibbled still at her sweetmeats, and tossed her head at the sight of the sailor and the bond-lass. Through the door into that same great cabin whence Blithe the night before had drawn comfort and courage.

There stood Master Nawn, hands on hips, and there, seated at a table, was the broad gentlewoman, somewhat less broad, now that her wrappings were laid aside, but still awesome enough, with her reddened face and bushy brows. On a couch against the wall, with the child beside her, nestled in the hollow of one arm, like a treasure almost lost, reclined the grave and tender lady to whose singing Blithe had listened.

Looking upon her sweet face, Blithe felt suddenly that somehow all was well.

"And this, Mistress Winwood, so please you, is the wench herself," spoke Nawn, in his least surly manner.

The lady held out her hand.

"My good child!" she said, and on her lips the words were like a caress.

Blithe ran to the couch, and knelt beside her, and touched her hand.

"I am main sorry," she spoke breathlessly, "that the little one was frightened."

The broad gentlewoman snorted.

"Frighted, in sooth!" she cried. "'Twas Kitt herself was a naughty wench, niece, and deserveth worse than a frightening. 'Spare the rod,' thou knowest. A moment more, and the head-long child had been plunged in the waves."

"Good aunt!" besought young Mistress Winwood, shuddering.

"With mine own eyes I saw," went on the older woman, "and a rare taking it set me in, and my stomach already queasy with the joggling of the ship. Just as I stepped foot through the door, I saw, and myself too far removed to be of aid. Ay, Niece Cicely, that thy child is this hour alive is thanks to Heaven and this young lass, and no thanks at all," she ended snappishly, "to Delia Sedgwick, who is a heedless, empty-pated zany, like her mother before her."

She paused to get breath, and in the pause spoke Master Nawn:

"Ay, 'tis a handy wench, and of godly up-

bringing, and in all things will serve your turn, I dare maintain."

"What is thy name, child?" asked Mistress Winwood, with her hand on Blithe's shoulder.

"Blithe—" she began, but the master cut her short.

"Ay, 'tis the fond name they gave her at home. But duly christened she was, Nell Hurdie, as I have told you. Good, honest folk her parents both, of mine own village, and piously upbrought she was, though humbly. She will content you, gentlewomen."

"That I am sure of, master," said Mistress Winwood.

"So ye may leave this paragon to us," the broad gentlewoman hinted, broadly enough.

Only when Nawn had gone, with Deptford Robin, out of the cabin, did the lady, Mistress Cicely Winwood, make clear to Blithe what all this to-do was about.

"Good Blithe," said she, "and 'tis a pleasant little name and fitteth thee well, wouldst thou be content for the space of the voyage to tend upon my child?"

"Content?" snorted the broad gentlewoman. "The girl looketh not to be a fool."

"Serve you?" stammered Blithe. "O lady!"

"Thou shalt be lodged here in the great cabin,"

went on Mistress Winwood, "both night and day, for the better tending of thy charge. The master doth permit."

"Permit?" cried the broad gentlewoman. "Ay, graciously doth he 'permit,' and thou paying roundly for the maid's services. 'Tis folly indeed of thee, Cicely, but thou wilt ever have thy way."

Grumbling as if she were angered at Master Nawn, and Mistress Winwood, and Blithe not least of all, the broad gentlewoman rose and lumbered to a cloak-bag, tossed in a corner. Out of it she drew something round and soft-seeming and brown.

"Here!" she said to Blithe. "Put those on thy chapped ankles, and be seemly!"

She dropped the object into Blithe's lap, and it disclosed itself to be a pair of warm, knitted stockings. In the same breath the donor wrapped her whittle about her, like a soldier girding on his armour.

"Now," spoke she, "I shall forth, and say to Delia Sedgwick what her mother, the poor donought, should have said to her years ago."

Forth she went and shut the door behind her with violence.

Blithe hugged the stockings in her two hands.

"O mistress!" She looked up at Mistress

Winwood, with a misty smile. "But it is too good for belief. I to dwell with you in this wondrous, airy cabin all these long days, and to play with the little gentlewoman, for to tend on a good child is naught but play. Why, 'tis all even as Sawkin foretold it, and I did not believe her, when she prattled of the wonders of Virginia, and how I should live easy there."

"Virginia?" questioned Mistress Winwood. "But what of Virginia?"

"Why," said Blithe, "is't not to Virginia that I am bound?"

"Dear heart," said Mistress Winwood, "but didst not know this ship is for the plantation of Massachusetts in New England? 'Tis not in gay Virginia, but in Massachusetts, 'mongst the Puritans, that thy time will be to serve."



CHAPTER VII

SEA DAYS

WELL, after all, what mattered it, Virginia or the Massachusetts, Blithe reassured herself. 'Twas all in America, and if there were more snow and frost in the Massachusetts than in Virginia, why, so much the less risk of sunstroke. In any case, the Massachusetts, and whatever fortune there awaited her, were many days distant.

Meantime Blithe was happy beyond expectation. She lodged in the great cabin. She shared the good food that was set before the gentlewomen. She went warmly clad in a cloak and a hood and a new petticoat of red stammel, gifts of sweet Mistress Winwood and that terrifying, broad gentlewoman, her spinster aunt, Mistress Cynthia Mayhew. She tended on dear, little ruddy-haired Kitt, and romped with her, and guarded her, and for Kitt's sake strove always to speak with choice words, like Kitt's mother, no jargon of Crocker's Lane.

Two drawbacks only there were, in these long

spring days at sea, to make Blithe's happiness fall short of perfect.

One was that she served these kind folk under a name not her own and a pretence of pious country rearing that was false. At first she had been glad of the new name and parentage that Master Nawn, for his own purpose, had bestowed on her. But in a short while she grew troubled. To lie, alas! was not uncommon in Crocker's Lane, but from Granny McBride Blithe had learned that, none the less, to lie was wicked, and from Gerritt McBride, her cousin, she had brought the fine distinction that, while to lie to the harman beks and other enemies was commendable, to lie to one's friends was a poor, scurvy trick.

These gentlewomen were Blithe's friends, and kind, yet she was deceiving them. But what else could she do? If she confessed herself to be, not pious Nell Hurdie, but Blithe McBride of Crocker's Lane, doubtless she should find herself cast from this place that seemed to her Paradise. Moreover, stout-hearted lass though she was, she trembled to think of what might befall her at the hands of Master Nawn, should she, in telling the truth about herself, dare to accuse him of speaking falsely. No, to keep silent she judged to be her only course, and silent she kept, though at times with a groaning conscience.

The second drawback to her perfect happiness was the hostile presence of the silken girl with the box of sweetmeats.

Delia Sedgwick was this maiden's name, born and reared in England, and now bound to the care of kinsfolk in Massachusetts, who were in some fashion related to Mistress Mayhew and her gentle niece. For the first day or two Delia had seemed not unfriendly to Blithe. That is, while she sat on cushions and Blithe sat on the hard planks beside her, ever watchful of Kitt, she had talked to Blithe, while she nibbled raisins and green ginger from her cornfit-box. She had told Blithe of the lordly mansion in the country, where she had been reared, and how she could play upon the virginals to admiration, and was much commended for her graceful dancing, and how she had a gown of taffeta, and one of tabby, white satin slippers, and a necklace of pearl. Much she had hinted, too, of the splendours of the kinsfolk to whom she was going.

Blithe McBride from Crocker's Lane had listened to such tales with interest that no doubt was sweet to the teller, yet, being Blithe, she soon took note that such tales were not told in the hearing of Mistress Winwood or of Mistress Mayhew. Then, too, being Blithe, she must often break the

thread of the story, to rise and look to her little charge.

"Thou makest as much to-do over the peevish babe as doth its fond mother," complained Delia, at such an interruption, in a pettish voice.

Blithe reddened fiercely. What was this mincing lass, to speak ill of her dear lady?

"'Tis a count none will ever bring against you, mistress," she retorted promptly.

Delia flushed to the roots of her fair hair. She said nothing, but from that moment no love was lost between the two girls. Thereafter, in little ways, with stabs as fine as the prick of cambric needles, Delia made her displeasure felt. A look askance, a smile of half-guessed mockery, a drawing aside of her dainty skirt to avoid contact with Blithe's rough petticoat—it was wonderful how such trifles had the power with poor Blithe to dim the sunshine of the day and make the sky less blue.

So the days ran, a little marred, yet happy on the whole, till the good ship *Trial* was ten long days from port, and, with the wind to favour, leagues upon her westward journey. Then, on a grey afternoon, Blithe sat, cushioned, at the break of the poop. Upon her right hand Mistress Mayhew, in her green whittle and purple hood, slumbered sonorously. Upon her left hand Delia

Sedgwick yawned and wished the time away. But Blithe herself was busy, for she briskly knitted yarn that Mistress Mayhew, who could not bear to see a wench sit idle, had found for her, while she told Kitt, for the twentieth time, the piteous story of the poor babes in the wood.

Right in the midst of the tale Blithe grew aware of clamour forward. She saw the sailors at their tasks, and the bond-maids, who had come on deck to take the air, all craning their necks, as if something was to be seen.

Up roused Delia, with curiosity surprising in one so gently reared.

"What's to do?" she cried. "Go thou, Blithe, and bring us word again!"

But Blithe did not need to run, even if she had been minded to run at Delia Sedgwick's bidding, for at that moment Master Nawn came stamping down the companion ladder and bawled:

"Fetch him hither!"

Promptly two sailors, and neither of them the halfway kindly Deptford Robin, came aft, and between them they led Gilbert Vaughan, grey-faced and blinking, like one for a long time unaccustomed to the light of day.

"Stowaway, is't?" roared Nawn, but not so angry, thought Blithe, as he might well have been. "We'll lesson thee, faith!"

But how Nawn would lesson him, Blithe never waited to see, for she owed her first duty to Kitt. Up she swept the wondering child, and bore her into the great cabin, where Mistress Winwood, a wretched seafarer, spent most of the time upon her couch. There in the cabin Blithe prattled with Kitt for fully an hour. Then in came Mistress Mayhew, and bade her run fetch warm porridge from the galley for the child, whom she meantime would tend.

Out went Blithe, with Kitt's pewter porringer in her hand, and as she passed along the heaving deck, fairly stumbled upon Gilbert. Down on his knees he was, scrubbing planks that in all conscience seemed white enough already. He shook the roughened hair back from his forehead, and looked up at her, with a brave effort to smile.

"Blustering weather at sea, mistress," he said, "but it seemeth now to clear."

She caught his meaning.

"Heaven be thanked!" she said.

On her way back from the galley, she lingered again for a moment by his side.

"How hast thou fared the while?" she whispered.

"Food was brought me," he answered, "and now have I light, and space wherein to move. 'Tis a blithe world, I think."

She smiled that thus her name unconsciously was used, and he smiled back, and so she went her way.

But at the cabin door, with ranging eyes, stood Delia Sedgwick.

"Speedily thou art acquainted, Nell Hurdie," flattered Delia. "Or was yon cheat-gallows haply no new acquaintance of thine?"

"Think what ye will," said Blithe, with heart-beats quickened. "The porridge cooleth, and I am in haste."

Delia stood aside.

"But haste breeds waste," she mocked. "Hast not heard that said of thy pious parents, or was thy rearing perhaps not so pious as 'tis given to be?"

And at that gibe, and all the threat that it might conceal, Blithe went her way in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHAIN OF PEARL

“**I**N Mattachowsett,” said little Kitt Winwood, “liveth Grandsire. Hast a grand-sire, Bly? A’ will give Kitt a puppy-dog.”

“In the Massachusetts,” boasted Delia Sedgwick, “my kindred lord it over a vast estate of many acres, ay, and silly savages do them homage.”

She did not say in words, nor did she need to, for she said it with her gesture:

“I shall dwell among them like a princess, as my just deserts do warrant.”

“The days go slowly,” sighed Mistress Winwood. “Canst understand, Blithe? ’Tis six years since I left New England, that is my native land, at the side of the brave husband that now is dead. I long for the sight of my dear father’s face, and for the house on Windmill Hill in Boston, where I was born. Ah me! To smell again the pine-woods of New England!”

“Wellawell!” said Mistress Mayhew. “Here be I, in my middle years, faring forth to view the

world, and what a to-do they made thereover, the good folk at Buckton-le-Grand. Verily they esteemed me rooted there at Rodman's Chace, and there indeed was I bent to bide, so long as life was in mine honoured parents. But now will I to my brother William in the Massachusetts, and with mine inheritance," she chuckled, "haply will I buy land and will myself be yet a proprietor."

"Ah, do, good aunt!" begged Mistress Winwood. "No near kin are left you now in England. Stay with us always, in the new land! For none can need you more than do my widowed father, and my little child, and I."

"Fine words, sooth!" snorted Mistress Mayhew, but none the less looked pleased.

In short, the inmates of the great cabin looked forward with glad anticipation to their arrival in Massachusetts, an event now not many days distant. All the inmates, that is, except Blithe. Heavier and heavier grew her heart, the nearer she knew herself to port. For when they reached port, she must seek new masters, and having once made friends and tasted of kindness, she dreaded more than she had thought possible, to go among strangers.

In sorrowful mood she went out, one afternoon, when showers threatened, to fetch some pinnars of Kitt's that she had hung to dry upon

the forecastle. May month it was now, but the air at sea was chill. She was fain to run back to the shelter of the cabin, yet, dreading Delia Sedgwick's hostile eyes, was also fain to linger.

While she delayed, pretending to fold the pinners, up came Gilbert Vaughan, and fell to polishing the gun upon the forecastle. Often had they two thus met and passed a word, always, it seemed to Blithe, with Delia's eyes fixed on them like a burning glass. Yet how could she do otherwise than give a friendly word to one, so friendless, who looked to her with surety for comfort?

Gilbert was ragged and rough-haired, but at least the sea-tan that darkened his cheeks was hale and manlike, and he had always a smile with which to greet her.

"Soon shall we be a-land, they say," he told her, as he looked up from the task that he still plied. No shirkers, be sure, on the ship where Jack Nawn was master!

"What fortune, I wonder, doth await us?" questioned Blithe.

"Little I know or care," vowed Gilbert. "I make mine own fortunes now. 'Tis a wondrous land, Deptford Robin hath told me. Once was he a coastwise voyage to Monhegan, and knoweth whereof he speaketh. Broad acres are there, to be had almost for the asking, and streams that are

a-brim with fish, and forests where the deer go roving, and no keepers to drive honest huntsmen away. Ay, and there are savages with feathers on their heads, and chains of gold, and a man of mettle may have battles and encounters and every sort of strange adventure."

His eyes strayed westward, where the wonder land lay beyond the horizon, and as he gazed, his smile was not for Blithe.

Quietly she stole back to the cabin. Even Gilbert could look forward gaily. She was alone in her dread of what might await her in the Massachusetts.

Scarcely had Blithe gained the shelter of the cabin, when there was heard the patter of rain on the poop-deck above, and the narrow room darkened with the passing storm. Kitt fretted, a little frightened, and wearied, poor baby! with the tedium of the long sea-days.

"Open the chest yonder," bade Mistress Winwood, from her couch. "For once let Kitt look on her mother's gauds. Haply 'twill content her."

"And see to't thou disturb no gear of mine that lieth hard by," spoke Delia querulously, from the couch where she had lain down.

Mistress Mayhew said nothing. She dozed, as was her afternoon habit, in the big armchair that

she had brought with her from her father's house of Rodman's Chace in Buckton-le-Grand.

So Blithe opened the cypress chest, and with careful fingers took out the splendours that Mistress Winwood since her widowhood had laid aside. Hoods of bright-hued silk, kerchiefs edged with lace, long, perfumed gloves, a painted fan, she showed them all to Kitt, who gurgled with delight to view the pretty things. Among the rest Blithe found in a carved box a string of white beads that she clasped in a double strand round Kitt's chubby neck.

Then would Mistress Kitt be decked in all the finery. Hood after hood must be set upon her tumbled curls. Kerchief after kerchief must be folded round her shoulders. When that sport palled, it was Kitt that would deck her own dear Bly.

"No, no!" entreated Blithe. "Thy mother will be vexed, I to wear her brave raiment. And see, thou little wagtail, how thou hast plucked mine hair about my face, unseemly, like a poor madwoman."

She raised her hands to put aside the hood of crimson, and to smooth her hair that tumbled all about her cheeks, but Kitt, with baby strength, caught at her wrists and cried:

"No! No!"

Fearful lest the gentlewomen be disturbed, Blithe looked toward the couch. Then she saw that Mistress Winwood had risen on her elbow, and plucked at the sleeve of Mistress Mayhew, who was wide awake.

"Look, aunt, look!" bade Mistress Winwood. "There is a likeness now, even as I told you, and with the crimson hood it doth leap out. Mind ye the portrait in the oaken parlour?"

"Thou fond maid!" said Mistress Mayhew. "The sea-air goeth to thy brains."

"But see ye naught—"

"I see a dark lass, with rosy lips, in a hood of crimson, and her hair awry," spoke Mistress Mayhew, somewhat tartly. "Turn not the girl's head with foolish fancies."

Then, as she met Blithe's questioning glance, Mistress Winwood spoke quickly:

"Well hast thou done to keep the child content this weary afternoon. But now that the storm is passed, put by those vanities and out into the air."

Deftly Blithe laid in the chest hoods and kerchiefs and gloves. Meantime Kitt, with the carved box in her hand, went prattling to her mother.

"Dear heart!" cried Mistress Winwood. "Where is that which lay within the box?"

Blithe looked up, startled.

"The white beads?" she said, and glanced confidently toward Kitt, who nestled by her mother. To her dismay she saw that Kitt's throat was bare.

"I must have stripped them from the child," thought Blithe, in a flurry, while aloud she said:

"Indeed, good mistress, they are somewhere here beneath my hand."

Hurriedly and nervously, she sought among the garments, and then, in the tense silence, she heard the voice of Delia Sedgwick:

"What! Do ye mean that wench hath dared lay hand upon my chain of pearl—my chain I gave you, Mistress Winwood, for its greater safety?"

"Hush, child! It will be found," said Mistress Winwood. "'Twas blame of mine it ever was disturbed. Blithe knew not that the chain was none of mine."

But Delia cried, unappeased:

"Oh, Blithe here, and Blithe there, this paragon of a Blithe! Ye yet will learn what manner paragon she is, this wench from nowhere, but 'twill not bring my chain of pearl again, my pearls that she hath stolen! Thief she is, and thief writ large upon her face."

Blithe paused in her search, turned, as she felt, to stone. But before a voice could be raised,

whether in her defence or to further the attack, she knew not, Kitt gave a squeal of rare discomfort:

"O Mammy! O Bly! 'Tis cold water runneth all a-down Kitt's back! 'Tis vile, cold water!"

With a laugh of sheer relief, Mistress Winwood tore open the child's strait gown, and there, slipped between the little smock and the bare shoulders, was the chain of pearl, unclasped, and displaced by Kitt's movements.

"Here are your pearls, good Delia," said Mistress Winwood, with sweet dignity. "Blithe is no thief, as ye should know."

Mistress Mayhew gave a sudden snort, and her dignity was anything but sweet.

"'Thou shalt not bear false witness,' Delia Sedgwick," she quoted.

"'Tis no false witness," cried Delia, angrily. "What is she anyway, this Blithe that passeth her time hobnobbing with that young wastrel that stowed away? Ay, with mine own eyes have I seen her, and smiles hath she, forsooth, and nods, for all the thievish sailormen aboard."

Blithe flushed, in her turn. Too much she had borne this hour to bear more.

"By the Salamon, thou liest!" she cried, roundly as Gerritt McBride himself, and in the faces of

those about her read that by her own words she had destroyed herself.

"So! What words are these," cackled Delia, triumphantly, "for a maid of godly upbringing? Do but ask her what were her parents! Ask her where she learned such speech as she hath now bestown on us! Ask her! She will no doubt make honest answer! Ask her!"



CHAPTER IX

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

BLITHE rose to her feet. Through all her body she felt that she was trembling, as she strove to speak.

"Nay, child," soothed Mistress Winwood. "What should we ask? A few words thou hast heard in the street are naught. We know thee come of honest parentage."

"Art thou?" said Mistress Mayhew. With sharp eyes beneath bushy brows she seemed to Blithe to probe her very soul.

"I fear me not," said Blithe, but saying so, she met the questioner's eyes fairly and unafraid.

"Said I not so?" chirruped Delia.

"Hold thy tongue!" snapped Mistress Mayhew, and to Blithe she said, with a smile, albeit a grim one, "Tell truth, my girl, and shame the devil!"

Blithe laced her fingers hard against her breast. Of a sudden she had remembered Master Nawn. Yet now she had no thought of lying, come what would.

"My name is not Nell Hurdie," she spoke, in

a dry voice, "nor had I ever thought so to call me, but when the master named me so, I kept silent, for oh! I was so fain to be let stay here."

Then, to her own surprise, she hid her face in her hands, and sobbed, as never in her life before. She heard a wail from Kitt:

"My Bly is hurted. O mine own dear Bly!"

She felt the child's little arms cast round her knees, and then, as she sobbed beyond control, she felt other arms, kindly, laid about her shoulders.

"Sit down, poor lass!" spoke Mistress Winwood. "Sit down and take thy time."

"And thou, Delia," added Mistress Mayhew, "haply 'twere best thou shouldst for a space go take the air upon the deck. Nay, thy chain of pearl and all thine other trumpery are safe—safer, i' faith, than thine own future welfare that lieth all at mercy of so galloping a tongue."

So when Blithe was able at last to look about her, with half-drowned eyes, she saw but the wondering child, and the two women, whom she knew compassionate.

"I'm not Nell Hurdie," she repeated. "My name is Blithe McBride. Nor was I bred in the country, but oh! she did her best to rear me piously, my poor old grandam, and 'tis not easy done in Crocker's Lane."

"Where's that?" queried Mistress Mayhew, with knitted brows.

"In Whitefriars, mistress. Oh, how should ye know what like is London?" cried Blithe, in despair. "Mine uncle that harboured me was a thief, and so were his comrades. But my mother was a good woman, and honest, so hath my granny oft told me, and my father was one time a soldier, she hath vowed, and not like the others. Thieves all, except my granny, and now that she is dead, they would have sold me to a life of roguery. 'Twas for that I fled from London, and truth," she sighed, "these days on shipboard, they have been like Heaven."

She rose up bravely from the couch where she had been told to sit.

"Fare thee well, dear little Kitt!" she bade, and to the gentlewomen she said, "I will make clean and orderly the raiment ye have kindly lent me, and I will send it you back."

"Where goest?" snapped Mistress Mayhew.

"To the other bondwomen," Blithe answered.

"I cannot suffer—" quickly began Mistress Winwood, but the older woman checked her.

"Hush, niece! This will bear thinking on. Naught in haste."

But even while Mistress Mayhew spoke, there

came a masterful knock on the cabin door, and, hard upon the sound, in strode Nawn.

"What's here to do?" cried he. "What empty tale hath the little, idle jade been vapouring? As full of lies she is as a nut is full of meat. Believe her not, gentlewomen!" Then he turned on Blithe, and thundered, "Get thee forward to the others, thy betters! I'll learn thee to go snivelling false tales to my discredit."

But Mistress Winwood stood between Blithe and the master.

"Good sir," she spoke, with dignity, "pray what is this? The girl is my servant, and her time allotted me till the voyage shall be at end."

"Ay, sooth," said Nawn, "and if this wind hold, the voyage shall end with to-morrow's sunset."

"Moreover," Mistress Winwood spoke on, and quietly though she spoke, put him to silence, "it is my purpose, once we come to land, to buy of you her time till she be one and twenty."

"Eh?" said Master Nawn. "What say ye there?"

"Ay, to buy her time," struck in Mistress Mayhew. "'Tis for sale, belike? To buy her time, man! Stand not and stare like a moon-calf! To buy her time, on such fair terms as may obtain

in the plantations. The wench doth well content my niece. We'll buy her time. Or have ye aught to say against us as purchasers?"

"I?" said Nawn, with a bewildered look. "No, no! Not I! I had but thought— Belike I have mistook."

"Belike your silken informer was herself at fault," snorted Mistress Mayhew.

But when the master had gone out, somewhat crestfallen, she spoke to Mistress Winwood and to Blithe, who were surprised almost as much the one as the other at the turn affairs had taken.

"Heaven forgive me," said Mistress Mayhew, "lest I bear myself false witness 'gainst another! The cracks are wide. Our voices were raised. He may have overheard our speech. Haply 'twas not reported him, as I did hint."

But Mistress Winwood scarcely heeded the aspersion that had been cast on Delia, and withdrawn.

"Praise be, we come to land to-morrow!" she said, and with Blithe supporting her, sat down, quite feeble once again.

"But did ye mean it?" whispered Blithe. "I am to serve you still?"

"My word is passed," said Mistress Winwood. "Why, aunt, what could I else, and ye

were yourself as forward in the matter, even as I!"

"No fool to an old fool!" quoted Mistress Mayhew.

"We could not leave this child to the mercy of such an one, only for her truth-speaking. Somehow my father will arrange all. I've asked of him no favour in long." Mistress Winwood laid her hand on Blithe's shoulder, and smiled upon her where she knelt. "There!" said she. "Thou'lt come now with me and tend on little Kitt, and forget the loathsome place thou hast fled from, and the evil thou hast happily escaped."

"Mistress," said Blithe, "truth, I would gladly die for you. And now," she changed her tone quickly, afraid lest again she should weep, "I will go forth and fetch Kitt's porridge."

"Wait!" bade Mistress Mayhew. "What was it that thou gavest thy name to be?"

"'Tis Blithe McBride," Blithe answered, almost proudly, so good it was to have her own name once again.

But as she turned toward the door, she heard Mistress Winwood speak quickly:

"McBride? Nay, wherefore hath the name familiar sound?"

Pat came Mistress Mayhew's answer, even as might have been expected:

"These whim-whams! Niece, thou growest fond indeed."

Blithe stayed to hear no more, and what she had heard, she had not heeded. Out she went into the air, and this time, going about her task, she laughed in Delia Sedgwick's face.

CHAPTER X

WELCOME

IN the glad sunlight of the next afternoon, Blithe stood by the bulwark, with Kitt at her side, and watched the port of promise open to receive her. Near at hand, and far as eye might reach, islets all clad in virgin green bedecked the blue waters of the harbour. In the distance three great and irregular hills reared themselves against the western sky.

"Dost mark yon hills?" spoke Deptford Robin, as he passed by. "Three Mount of old they named the headland, but now 'tis Boston, for St. Botolph's town in Lincolnshire."

"And yon shall be my dwelling place," thought Blithe, with leaping heart, "till I be one and twenty, and my time served out."

Then she looked at Kitt's head of curls, nestled against her arm, and smiled upon the future, with stout courage.

Nearer, with the wind to favour, and nearer, the good ship *Trial* drew to her anchorage. Fisher-boats they passed, with bronzed, unshaven men at the sheets and tiller. Once they met and

saluted a stout sloop, bound, as the sailors said, with pipe-staves and dried fish to the West Indies, whence it should fetch back sugar and tobacco. Beneath their side they saw a cockle craft of bark go slipping, governed and driven with a single strange, short oar.

"'Tis an Indian boat, a canoe," spoke Gilbert Vaughan. Forgetful of discipline, he hung over the bulwark close beside Blithe. "If once I might spy a savage tawny-skin! But he who driveth the canoe is a Christian man, albeit a hairy one."

Then one of the crew came and cuffed Gilbert back to his labour, and Blithe was left to gaze, with none but Kitt to keep her company.

The ship found berth, with the tide to help her, and presently dropped anchor. So near to the shore they lay that Blithe could make out the roofs of the houses that were huddled on the slope of the hills, and the wharves that thrust themselves, like black fingers, into the blue of the harbour. Upon the hill at her right she saw the sails of a windmill that went slowly round. Was this, she wondered, the Windmill Hill where Master William Mayhew dwelt?

"Grandsire will give Kitt a puppy-dog," murmured the little one at her side. "What will he give thee, Bly?"

"I know not," Blithe spoke dubiously.

Across the harbour, that slowly darkened as the sun dropped nearer to the hills, she saw small boats come rowing. Presently she saw them lie to beneath the side of the *Trial*. Up the rope ladder, and through the break in the bulwark, came men of the Massachusetts, rugged men, with a look of business about them, in felt hats and stout doublets and breeches of grey or brown homespun, with long knitted stockings. From afar Blithe eyed them, while she wondered which of them, if any, might be Master William Mayhew?

In the boats below sat the rowers, serving-men in leathern breeches and brogans, coarse shirts and jerkins, with Monmouth caps upon their heads. Hardy, sunbrowned fellows were they, who bandied words with the sailors and with the bondwomen, who hung upon the forward bulwark.

Once again, made bold with the air of this new world, Gilbert stole to Blithe's side.

"Thou art sure for thyself whither thou shalt go?" he questioned wistfully.

"I hope I may be," sighed Blithe.

"I know not," said Gilbert. "I look on the faces of those that come, and I wonder. I hope 'tis to one who dwelleth inland, nigh the savages, that my time is sold."

He drew nearer.

"An I see thee not again," he said, "all good go with thee, Blithe! Thou hast stood true friend to me from the first hour."

"Nay," Blithe answered, "the Massachusetts are not so wide as the world. Perhaps we shall meet again. Indeed, I hope it, Gilbert."

So they parted, the boy and the girl that London had cast out. Gilbert scurried to his task in the galley, while Blithe led Kitt gently into the cabin. She found that she had timed her coming aptly.

Master William Mayhew was indeed one of those who had come aboard. He sat at the table, a tall, broad-shouldered man of fifty odd, bearded and sunburnt, yet sufficiently like Mistress Cynthia Mayhew to be known anywhere to be her brother.

"And is he kind," thought Blithe, "even as she, with all her tartness, hath proved kind?"

Quickly Mistress Winwood had spied the newcomers, where she was seated near her father.

"Sir," spoke she, "here is mine only one, my little Katharine."

She held out her hands, and when Kitt ran to her, set her upon her grandfather's knee.

"A chopping lass, in truth," said Master Mayhew, smiling, as he touched the child's ruddy curls.

"And this," spoke Mistress Winwood, at this good moment, "is the young wench whereof I told you."

Blithe dropped a courtesy, quaking.

"Of Irish blood, thou sayest?" asked Master Mayhew.

"My grandfather was such, so like you, sir," ventured Blithe, "but my granny, she was English-woman."

"The name?"

"McBride, sir."

"Hey?" said he. "McBride?" He hesitated, frowning, as one who held in mind something unspoken. "A handy wench, thou sayest?" he questioned at last.

"Ay, truly, sir," said Mistress Winwood, "and of good cheer, and ever obedient."

Still Master Mayhew hesitated, while Blithe's heart stood still.

"We have serving-wenches enow," said he, "with Moll and old Nance. What should we do with this long lass? Thou lookest not, Cis, to have a maid solely to run at thy child's heels, here in this busy land?"

Like a weight of lead, realisation fell on Blithe that these gentlefolk, her benefactresses, were not after all as rich and powerful as queens in a chap-book tale. The price of her time and the cost of

her keep afterward were items evidently that they must reckon.

"Oh, good sir," she cried headlong, "only take me now, and I'll serve you without hire so many years as ye may will, once I am one and twenty."

Master Mayhew looked at her, not altogether sternly.

"I am no Laban, wench," said he.

"Ye'll not regret it, if ye take her, brother," Mistress Mayhew spoke for the first time.

"Well, well," said he. "At the farm in Saybury my good sister-in-law mourneth ever that she hath more than a single pair of mortal hands may do. Haply at the farm— But here," he amended, "is Delia Sedgwick bound thither, and no doubt will give her aunt Bicknell all the aid she lacketh."

"I, sir?" cried Delia. "Lud, sir, I am no kitchen wench, though at need I might distil an essence or even bake a custard."

Then it seemed to Blithe that Master Mayhew was of a mind to snort like his sister Cynthia.

"Custard your aunt no custards, I counsel you," he bade. Then he looked from his sister to his daughter, and with his eyes sought Blithe. "'Tis folly, doubtless," he said. "Still, if the lass be handy and well conditioned, as ye give her to be! I'll e'en go speak with the master."

He set Kitt down, and rising went from the cabin. For the first time since she came in, Blithe drew a long breath.

"Four and twenty years since last I saw him," spoke Mistress Mayhew, "yet is Brother Will not changed a tittle. 'Tis all in order, once he hath said. Bestir thee now, Blithe! Make Kitt ready for the going ashore, and bundle the last of my gear into yon cloak-bag."

With nimble fingers Blithe gave herself to the task. She was indeed to go ashore, and there to stay with her protectors. Oh, she found it good beyond belief, and yet she found it true!

In due time Master Mayhew came back to the cabin.

"Let us now homeward," he spoke, and, lifting Kitt on his arm, gave a hand to his sister. "Ay, all of you. The lass cometh with us."

Blithe took up Mistress Mayhew's cloak-bag, and her own few belongings, which were wrapped in a great kerchief. Laden thus, she followed the others out on the deck, and by the ticklish ladder into one of the boats that waited below. Gear and to spare, already was heaped in the boat—the cypress chest, and other chests besides, Mistress Mayhew's armchair, great rolls of bedding, a picture, guarded with thin strips of board, a huge copper kettle.

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Heavily laden, the boat moved slowly up the channel. Little by little Blithe made out the chimneys on the huddled houses, and the windows in their walls, the batteries on the hills to left and right, and presently, as they bore to the right, the guns in the battery upon the Windmill Hill. As they crept into the shadowy dock, she saw how what had hitherto seemed moving mites grew to the stature of men that awaited their coming.

"'Tis Mayhew's Dock we come to, aunt," spoke Mistress Winwood, with some pride.

"To the right lieth my ship-yard," Master Mayhew added, "and to left mayst see the roofs of Cleaves's mill, that was of old thy playfellow, Cis."

"Ye speak of Roger Cleaves?" Mistress Winwood questioned.

Then there was no further chance for speech. Yarely the boat was laid to alongside a staunch wharf, and a moment later, in the twilight that was softly closing, Blithe hopefully set foot in the new world.

Some lounging fellows, in leather breeches and Monmouth caps, who seemed to have awaited their coming in the hope of employment, were at once set speeding by commands of Master Mayhew's. Jestng and jostling, they began to fetch the gear from the boat. Blithe lingered for an

instant to watch them. She was unsteady on her land-legs, and a little bewildered by the strangeness of the place. As she caught her breath and started to overtake the gentlefolk, who had preceded her up the wharf, she was almost pushed over by one of these rude porters.

"Cheerly, sister!" quoth he, with rough kindness, as he steadied her by the arm.

For all the dimness of twilight, she saw his face clearly, young and reckless, with eyes that laughed, and a scar on the lean cheek. Looking on that face, she seemed to move in a dream.

"Oh, no!" she heard her voice, muted as in a dream. "'Tis never thou!"

"What say'st?"

Stayed by the tone, he paused at her side, and with his eyes searched hers.

"Hast thou forgot me," she panted, "and the old house in Whitefriars, and Granny, that was ever kind? Hast thou forgot me? For I have ne'er forgot thee, my cousin, Gerritt McBride."

CHAPTER XI

THE PRIGGER OF PRANCERS

PACE slowly!" bade Gerritt McBride, nimble-witted always, as a prigger of prancers needed to be. "I'll o'er reach thee ere thou art far on the Fore Street."

Still mazed, as if in a dream, Blithe lagged slowly, with her bundles, up Mayhew's Wharf, in the twilight, and into the narrow waterside street along which her masters trudged homeward. After all, she had small reason to linger and to stare, for the houses, of substantial English brick, with jetties and gables, were many of them such as she had seen in London, and the lounging sailor-folk, in wide breeches, with rings in their ears, were like the denizens of Thames-side, not unfamiliar to her. But, to tell the truth, she was seeking, half eagerly, and half fearfully, for a glimpse of tawny-skinned savages, with feathers on their heads, such as she had imagined to roam in numbers through the streets of Boston.

Then there came a step close at her heels, and

at her side walked Gerritt McBride, with a trunk upon his shoulder.

"Unlock thy lips now, little coz," bade he. "What wind of ill luck or of good hath blown thee into bleak New England?"

She told him, while they walked up the crooked hillside lanes that sprang unexpectedly, one from another. Everything she told him, though swiftly, that had happened since the wet afternoon when she went out to fetch water from the conduit, and met with Sawkin of Devon.

"So she is dead, the good old granny," said Gerritt, softly. "Rest her well! She hath peace at last, as never in this life before."

"I think 'twould gladden her," Blithe answered, "if she knew me so happily fortunèd. Good folk I am to serve, Gerritt. Gentlefolk of Norfolkshire, from Buckton-le-Grand."

"Sayest so?" spoke he. "From that way cometh Master William Mayhew? Lord love us, 'tis a small world, sooth, or I have forgot my grandam's lore."

Blithe interrupted him. At any moment she feared that they might reach the house whither they were bound, and the chance to speak with Gerritt would be taken from her, while she still had much to learn.

"Tell me!" she said. "How hath it fared

with thyself, Gerritt, since thou fled'st from Rom-vile—nay, London I should name it.”

“Thou growest to be a ¹ gentry mort,” smiled Gerritt. “Why, I have dwelt midway of Fortune’s favours, neither high enough to provoke envy, nor low enough, by the Salamon! so as men should spurn me and ’scape unscathed. First came I a-land in the Virginias, where my time was sold to a curmudgeonly planter-fellow. Having no wish to such coarse companionship, I absconded by night, and conveyed myself into Maryland, where giving myself to be a poor, mistreated Romanist, I was kindly entertained. Chance threw in my way a purse of gold, and I was so fortunate as to find by the roadside a horse, a kind beast, and very fain of my company.

“For a while I tarried among the Swedes of New Jersey, giving myself to be a gentleman, as in truth I should ’a’ been, if parts do merit preferment. But in time came folk to ask curious questions. There was awkwardness touching a parcel of silver spoons, that were to seek, so, feeling mine honour thereby attainted, I removed me quietly into the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, where I dwelt happily, by the sale of a parcel of silver spoons that, if thou’lt believe it, I found providentially among my gear.

¹ Gentlewoman.

"Then fell I to dicing, and fared merrily, for the Dutch are jovial lads, not like the coney-catching Puritans in these dull coasts. But one night there was question of a card, and a man stabbed i' the ribs, but not, I protest, mortally. So I shipped me hastily, with no time to make choice, upon a coastwise craft, bound for Monhegan. Liking the master little, I there absconded to the savages, droll folk and hospitable, where among I have dwelt these six months.

"Now am I but newly come to Boston, though little affectioned unto Puritans. Still, a lad of parts may thrive, even here. Within the month I shall have shed these poor garments and found worthier employ than this shouldering of other men's boxes. And then in fat days as in lean I shall be mindful of thee, my good little coz."

In friendly fashion Gerritt spoke, and his smile was, as ever, winning. Yet Blithe felt her heart sink to hear him speak. For, now six weeks removed from Crocker's Lane, she knew his tale for what it was, a boastful record of theft and roguery, and she knew him, kindly though he seemed, a rascal through and through.

But she had no time to wonder what alteration the coming of Gerritt McBride might work in her fortunes, for at that moment she saw the gentlefolk, who walked before the halt at the portal

of a clayboarded house, with overhanging upper story, that sat upon the highway where two streets crossed. Candlelight stole through the latticed windows. The door was opened by an old, tidy woman, in a white curch, who cried:

"Praise Heaven for this hour!"

Then they all stood within a firelit room, cased in dark wood, and simply furnished, though comfortably, with gate-legged tables, and flag-bottomed chairs. The old woman fluttered like one daft from Mistress Mayhew to little Kitt, and back to Mistress Winwood, while they named her, "Nance! Kind Nance!" and bade her not to weep.

She had served the Mayhews in their old home at Buckton-le-Grand, Blithe gathered, and had come across the seas at Mistress Mayhew's death, to tend upon her orphan daughter, and care for the widower's house.

Presently the good old woman was quieted and happy, with Kitt upon her lap. Then the stout serving-wench, Moll, brought food and set it upon the table—fresh bread, and cheese, and home-brewed beer, milk, and honey, and sliced cold mutton. But while the tired voyagers ate their supper, and Blithe shyly grew on good terms with round-eyed Moll, who, bred in the plantations, was full of wonder at folk from beyond seas, in

came the men with the luggage that they had fetched from the wharf, and Master Mayhew rose to give orders for its placing.

Unhandily the men had done their task. One trunk was muddled where it had been let fall. A chest was scarred. The picture, sheathed in wood, was half uncased. Master Mayhew chided them sharply, as he told down their hire.

"But one among you serveth handsomely," he spoke. "Where be'th the lad with the scarred cheek, was first at the house with his burden?"

"Here am I, sir," spoke Gerritt McBride, as he came jauntily from the kitchen, where Moll, much taken with his bold looks, had supplied him with beer.

"Dost lack employment?" Master Mayhew questioned.

"Ay, so like you, sir," Gerritt answered, brisk and respectful, as he well knew how to seem.

"Then shalt thou have it these next days in my ship-yard," promised Master Mayhew. "Go thither in the morn."

Then the men, dismissed, went clumping from the house, while Moll flew to clean the floor that their boots had sullied. Blithe saw that Gerritt half nodded upon her as he went, and she finished her supper, sick at heart. For Gerritt McBride, in Boston, was the Gerritt McBride of London,

and no safe comrade, as she well knew, for any sober folk.

"Come, lass," old Nance roused her, not unkindly, from her brooding. "Here's work a-plenty, and all at once to do. Mine old bones are not so nimble as once they were. Come with me above stair, and we'll order the gear yon fellows have dumped down in my lady's chamber."

Up the narrow stair went old Nance and Blithe, with an unsteady candle to light them. In the great chamber above, with its curtained bed and well-swept hearth, were chests most hurriedly set down, and against one of them leaned the picture.

"This should be cared for," spoke Nance as she set the candle on the little stand by the bedside.

"Mine hands are strong," cried Blithe, "and the boards already loosed."

Swiftly, and glad to be of service, she pried away the frail sheathing, and at sight of what she had uncovered, gave a little cry. For in the candlelight she looked on the portrait of a young, dark girl, with rosy lips and dark hair, falling about her face beneath a hood of crimson, while in the mirror on the opposite wall she saw a dark girl, with rosy lips and dark hair disordered, like enough to the portrait to be a sister, and she knew that mirrored girl to be herself.

CHAPTER XII

SHE OF THE PORTRAIT

“**G**OOD dame,” Blithe hesitated, after a moment, “what might be this portrait?”

“Eh?” said Nance. She turned from shaking out the garments that she had lifted from one of the chests. “Let me look nearer. My sight is not so keen as once it was.” She peered upon the portrait. “Be good to us!” she cried. “I have not looked thereon in thirteen years, but well I know it. ’Twas hung in the oaken parlour at Rodman’s Chace, our old home there in Buckton-le-Grand.”

“The portrait in the oaken parlour,” murmured Blithe, while she let her thoughts go back to the afternoon in the great cabin, when she had put on the crimson hood. “But who is she, this young gentlewoman?” she ventured another question.

“’Tis Mistress Elizabeth, the youngest sister of Master William and of Mistress Cynthia,” said the old woman. “Painted at fifteen years,

the dear, poor lass! Come, come!" she roused herself. "Briskly to thy task! Here's much to do to make our ladies comfortable, and the little one, Heaven shield her!"

After that the good soul would prattle of Kitt, and only of Kitt, till Kitt's small self was safely laid in bed. Then, with a kind dismissal, Blithe went to the narrow chamber that she was to share with Moll. She must be tired, said Mistress Windwood, for 'twas a trial indeed, the first hours on land. But though she lay down at once, Blithe did not sleep for a long time, while she wondered what might be the connection between herself and the dark maiden of the portrait, Mistress Elizabeth Mayhew.

Betimes the house on Windmill Hill was astir. Early hours were the rule in Boston town, but Blithe had not been bred to lie late in Crocker's Lane. She sang aloud while she helped Moll in the great kitchen, and from a contented heart she whispered Amen to the long prayers that Master Mayhew said in the presence of his assembled household, before they broke their fast.

Happily those first days sped in Boston town. Delia Sedgwick, with the spiteful tongue and the prying eyes, had gone to visit relatives on Cotton Hill. The rest of the household were kind, even

Master Mayhew, for all that he said such long prayers and marshalled a body to meeting on Sunday. A great man he was in the plantation, Blithe discovered, for all that he went clad so soberly. He owned a wide farm inland, at a place called Saybury. He owned this house on Windmill Hill, and a ship-yard by Mayhew's Dock, and a warehouse, stored most times with sugar and indigo that his ships had brought from the Barbados, and wine from the Canaries. Also he was a magistrate, who sat in the monthly court, with power of life and death.

Blithe was quite in awe of him, yet she found him vastly human. One day she was bidden to wipe the dust from the furniture in the dwelling room, and while she was at the task, he came in with papers, and sat down at the desk, where stood his ink-stand, and quill pens, and sand-box. He did not begin writing at once, however. Uneasily she felt that his eyes were upon her.

"Blithe," spoke he, half musingly.

"Ay, sir!" She courtesied before him.

"Nay, child. I called thee not. I mused but on the name. 'Tis all of it?"

She hunted among old memories.

"Blithe-in-Terbulation, once my granny said."

He smiled.

"Blithe-in-Tribulation, haply. Not the manner

of name, verily, to be looked for 'mongst the Irishry."

"But, sir," she protested, "my granny was an Englishwoman."

He looked at her sharply.

"Dost know her name ere marriage?"

"Nay, sir." Blithe sadly shook her head.

"Well, well!" he said. "It mattereth naught. Be still a good lass, and diligent, and whatever thy name, all will speed well with thee."

So she was dismissed, and for all that he had been kind, she went gladly from the room. She had been half afraid that, while he was speaking of names, he might ask if Gerritt McBride were kin to her. Yet very likely, she comforted herself, and indeed most likely, Gerritt went now by a different name.

Often she had wondered, and uneasily, even in those happy days, what had become of Gerritt, and if he still were employed at Master Mayhew's ship-yard. Within a short time now, she found her unasked question answered.

One afternoon, when the gentlewomen had gone out to show Kitt to an old friend of her grandmother's, Mistress Cleaves in Middle Street, Gerritt himself came jauntily to the house. He had a basket of tools beneath his arm, and he said that he was sent thither by the master, for

there were steps to mend, and a break in the casing of the dwelling room to patch. Heartily he was made welcome by Moll, and not frowned upon even by Nance.

"Thou art jack of all trades, I see," Nance spoke, as she watched him, neatly and handily at work in the dwelling room.

"Ay, of many trades," said he, "and eager at all times to please."

Blithe, on her knees by the hearth, was polishing the great andirons. She was glad that Nance lingered, to oversee them both. She dreaded rather than wished to be alone with Gerritt, and she was grateful that he had no more than bidden her good morrow.

In a pause of his work, he looked up at the portrait of Mistress Elizabeth Mayhew that hung above the chimneypiece. A wonder it was to Blithe, and rather a disappointment, that no one had looked with amazement from her to the portrait, seeing the resemblance that she so eagerly had marked, but perhaps it had been otherwise, she comforted herself, if, as in the great cabin, she had put on a hood of crimson and let her hair fly loose.

"'Tis not oft one lighteth on such portraiture in this rude country," said Gerritt, with such admiration that Nance smiled upon him.

"They are gentlefolk, the Mayhews," she bridled, "whether in England or the new lands."

"'Tis easy seen," flattered Gerritt, "only to look on the worshipful lady in yon portrait. Who is she, pray?"

"Mistress Elizabeth, my master's sister."

Still Gerritt studied the pictured face, while Blithe studied him, and wondered if he would ask the questions that she had not dared to ask.

"Pity," said he, "so fair a lady should have died unwed."

"Who saith so?" cried Nance. "Suitors a-plenty she had, and sorrow on't that she would none of them! But 'twas a gentleman she married, be sure, though none of her father's choice."

"Yet did he forgive them, doubtless," hinted Gerritt, "even as in a ballad of print, and they called their first child by his name."

"Nay," said old Nance, and sighed. "It fell not so. Would Heaven all had ended happily! My poor young mistress!"

"Is she dead, then?" questioned Blithe, forgetful of her task and all about her.

"How should it be else?" Nance spoke tartly. "Dead this many a long year."

"And buried in churchyard within sight of her father's house," insinuated Gerritt.

It was the word too much.

"What concern is it of thine?" said Nance, with a lowering look. "Thou art full curious, my man. Look to thy task! And thou, Blithe," she went on, more kindly, "if thou there art ready, go above stair, and make all clean and bright in Mistress Cicely's chamber."

Half gladly, half unwillingly, Blithe went out of Gerritt's presence. Well, at least she could thank that undesirable kinsman for further knowledge of the portrait lady. While she wondered what the story of Mistress Elizabeth, half hinted, really might have been, she was less swift than usual at her work. Presently she saw, by the slant of the sunlight through the chamber window, that it was late afternoon, and the gentlewomen soon to return, if not already below. Then she hurried at her half neglected task, forgetful of everything else, until suddenly she was roused to other needs by an uproar that echoed up the stair.

Scurry of feet, the bang of a door, a shrill cry in Moll's voice:

"The thief! Ah, the vile thief!"

"O my heart!" cried Blithe.

Headlong she fled down the stair, and into the dwelling room. There she saw only what she had known that she must some day see—flurried serving-women, talking both at once, Mistress

Winwood, holding Kitt fast in her arms, Mistress Mayhew, with knitted brows, Master Mayhew, stern as flint, Captain Cleaves, his friend, and in their midst, backed against the wall dishevelled, with the constable, quickly summoned, at his elbow, caught red-handed in his thievery, Gerritt McBride.

CHAPTER XIII

CONFESSION

“**H**AVE done with this clamour!” commanded Master Mayhew, in the same cold voice, Blithe sensed with terror, in which as magistrate he would pass judgment.

“Give heed, Goodman Whipple,” he addressed the constable. “There on the table lieth a purse, which holdeth the value of three pounds and more in Holland ducatoons and ryalls of eight. In my desk yonder did I leave it, and thence mine old serving-woman spied it missing, and privily sent for me. At her warning I came hither, with Captain Cleaves, who was found in speech with me, and laying hands on this fellow we took the purse from within his shirt, as the serving-women and my sister here are also witnesses.”

“Needeth small witnessing,” growled the constable. “I’ve had my eye upon this saucy chapman, ever since he came ashore from the *Rainbow* pinnace, a fortnight since. He hath his fate predestinate writ large upon him, and a hangman’s noose hath part therein.”

"Take him hence to prison," bade Master Mayhew. "He shall come before the court at our next sitting."

Then Gerritt McBride smiled brightly on the shocked assemblage.

"To think," said he, "that I should come to such a pass through the sin of over-confidence! I to be laid by the heels in the ¹ dewse-a-vile of an ancient mort and a ² quier cudden, I that ruffled it like a lad o' life, and scorned to mingle with such base sort as dummerers and mere prigs."

He laughed outright, and at the sound the constable jerked him by the arm, so that Kitt fell a-weeping for sympathy. Master Mayhew's face grew sterner even than before.

"Thou'lt speedily laugh otherwise, thou rogue," said he. "Three years forced service at the least shalt thou render for this prank, and if my word have weight, thou'lt suffer also where thou'lt feel it most, that meaneth, in thine unworthy body. Well whipped shalt thou be, I can promise. Twenty stripes at least, and well laid on."

Blithe stifled a little cry, with her hands pressed to her lips.

Scant laughter now was in Gerritt's whitening face.

¹ Country.

² Country officer.

"Have done!" said he, roughly, yet with a kind of beseeching, to the constable who would have haled him forth. Then he turned to Master Mayhew.

"Sir," he said, quite civilly, "will it not content you haply to look with more lenience upon my sin? Grievously, and, worse, like a mere fool, have I wrought, and so I do confess, but other matter would I confess also. As namely—" with his sharp eyes he scanned Master Mayhew closely— "I have deceived you, touching my name. 'Tis not Jack Sperry, as I gave it to be, but Gerritt McBride."

"McBride!" Master Mayhew echoed the word, as if against his will.

"Ay," spoke Gerritt, "cousin to the young wench doth serve you."

For the first time Captain Cleaves, the steady-eyed soldier, spoke a word.

"Wilt shelter thyself behind a young maid's skirts?" he questioned, with cold contempt.

"Nay," said Gerritt, "but haply behind another's. For my grandam, Master Mayhew, was Jane Dantry that served your worshipful father many years and faithfully, in his house at Buckton-le-Grand."

There was a little stir among those who listened.

"Eh, what! Jane Dantry?" cried old Nance.

Swift glances passed between Mistress Mayhew and Mistress Winwood.

"'Twas for that, then, the name rang familiar," spoke Mistress Winwood, half aloud.

But Master Mayhew never changed expression.

"I remember Jane Dantry that served in our house," said he. "An honest soul, and married, as I recall, with a roving Irish fellow named McBride. But granted that thou be the good woman's grandson, it altereth not the fact that thou art thyself a thief, and thou goest hence to a thief's punishment, well deserved. Take him along, constable!"

The confidence in Gerritt's face was dashed, and his eyes were desperate.

"I tell you, I'll not ¹ cly the jerke!" he cried.

"Nay, brother—" Mistress Mayhew was beginning, when Master Mayhew cut her short.

"Constable," he repeated.

"Stay but a moment!" Gerritt besought, quite humbly. "An ye care not for blood of her that served you long and well, haply ye have a care for those of your own blood. Stand my friend this hour, master, and I can give you word of one was dear to you."

"Whither dost thou aim?" spoke Master May-

¹ Be whipped.

hew, coldly, but, as Blithe noted, very quickly.

Gerritt McBride gave it to him fairly.

"I mean your sister, Mistress Elizabeth, that my grandam nursed, Mistress Elizabeth, whose portrait hangeth yonder."

Blithe felt the air in the dwelling room to be like the sultry air of summer, before a tempest breaks with torrents and destruction.

"No, no! I never told thee naught," cried old Nance, shrilly. "Master! I make no gossip of your private doings, nor of great folk's secrets!"

Mistress Mayhew's voice cut through the old woman's shrillness. Startlingly at that moment she was like her brother.

"What knowest thou, fellow?" she demanded.

In her mother's arms Kitt, for very fear of the change in her old aunt's voice, hushed and gave over her crying.

"That Mistress Elizabeth, I mean," went on Gerritt, with the sweat upon his temples, as a man who throws a desperate hazard, "who married with Captain Giles Felton, and died outcast from her father's favour."

Master Mayhew towered at his full height, and his face was menace.

"Let the dead bide," he commanded, "nor seek to shield thee with their pitiful dust. Because thou hast dared for thine own craven purpose to

tent an old wound, I shall look well to it that thy punishment is no whit abated. No words!" He bent stern brows upon his womenkind, who were in the very act of pleading. "Take him hence!" he once more bade the constable.

Then Gerritt McBride, with a face like death, made his last cast.

"Sir!" cried he. "In mercy! If not for the sake of the dead, yet for sake of the living! 'Tis not of Mistress Elizabeth alone I can give you word, if ye show mercy, but of her child—her child!"

The tempest broke.

"What sayest thou?" thundered Master Mayhew.

"Ay, her child," babbled Gerritt. "Mistress Elizabeth's child, and Captain Felton's. Do but have mercy! Lay not this charge against me! All I will tell you—all—her child that liveth—your own sister's child!"

"Said I not so?" cried Mistress Winwood, in a voice that soared. "The likeness! Long since I had marked it. Look! Look!"

Then Blithe, huddled unnoted till that moment by the chimneypiece, felt, rather than saw, how all the faces in the room turned toward her, and how wondering eyes ranged from her, cowering, to the portrait of Elizabeth Mayhew that smiled kindly on her from the wall above.

CHAPTER XIV.

MEANTIME

UP in the narrow chamber that she shared with Moll, Blithe sat through the long moments while the twilight fell, and waited, and wondered. Surely, the gentlefolk were not angered with her! Gravely enough Master Mayhew had spoken, when he bade her go to her room, and there await his summons, but Mistress Winwood, as she passed, had caressed her shoulder fleetly with her hand.

What were they saying, below in the dwelling room? What truths were they wringing perhaps from Gerritt McBride? And whither did it all tend? Oh, such a wondrous thing was not to be believed! Yet though Blithe thus wisely assured herself, in her ears she seemed to hear a ringing as of silver joy-bells.

"If—" she thought, "and if—and if! But then I am niece to Master Mayhew, and cousin to sweet Mistress Winwood, come of honest folk and gently born, so that none may ever cry me shame. Oh, if—and if!"

Presently Moll came, with bread and cheese for Blithe's supper.

"Was ever such to-do?" whispered Moll, so awed by events, it appeared, that she dared not raise her voice. "Here's the thieving fellow—but a comely rogue, sooth!—laid in ward, after much question, and the master taking counsel now with Captain Cleaves, but I was indeed to tell 'ee naught, and least of all what yon fellow said."

Fearful lest she tell, Moll backed suddenly from the room.

Blithe tried to eat, but soon gave up the effort. How eat, indeed, when already her throat was clogged with the beating of her heart?

When Moll came again, it was night in the little room, and Blithe's head swam with much thinking.

"Come with me!" bade Moll, still over-awed and hushed.

Down the stair went Blithe, as one in a dream, and into the dwelling room, where she courtesied left and right. There in the candlelight Master Mayhew and Captain Cleaves were seated at the table, while on the settle, a little withdrawn in the shadows, were Mistress Mayhew and Mistress Winwood, who stealthily nodded Blithe encouragement.

"Come hither, my girl," bade Master May-

hew, not ungently. "Stand before us without fear. We must needs question thee."

"Ay, sir," breathed Blithe, and a little plucked up heart.

"Thou didst tell me," said Master Mayhew, "that thou knewest not thy grandam's name before her marriage."

"Ay, truly, sir," Blithe answered, "I never heard that name until this afternoon in your presence, here in this room, nor knew I aught of Buckton-le-Grand, save that there was of old your dwelling."

"But the young man," struck in Captain Cleaves, "is older than the girl by ten years or more. Well may he have heard and remembered more than she of their kindred's discourse."

"Haply," said Master Mayhew. "Now, tell me, Blithe," he bade, "and truly, what knowest thou of thy parents?"

Piteously Blithe repeated:

"My mother was a good woman and honest, so my granny always said, and for that I should be honest, too. And my father, she said, was one time a soldier, not a thief, like others of her sons, and for that I should be always of courage."

"There spoke Jane Dantry, well can I believe," said Mistress Mayhew, "and well the words might fit the child's parentage."

Her brother, with a gesture, prayed her to be silent.

"Dost know thy mother's name?" He turned again to Blithe.

"No, sir," she faltered.

"And thy father's?"

"They said 'twas Philip, Phil McBride."

"In that point she doth bear out the young man," said Captain Cleaves, "but the point not weighty."

Master Mayhew studied her keenly.

"Blithe," said he, "thou art of good understanding. Thou didst hear what passed in this room, and didst take its import, doubtless."

She nodded, without trusting her voice to speak.

"Tell me, hast thou ever in thy life, in Crock-er's Lane, heard aught to confirm thee in the hope that the young man's speech doth rouse in thee?"

She shook her head, and swallowed hard in her throat, without speaking.

"Proveth naught," snapped Mistress Mayhew, fiercely, "only that the girl is honest."

"Sister," Master Mayhew spoke patiently, "beseech you, remember I am not of her foes. Blithe," he went on, "'tis a weighty matter, as thou thyself art ripe enough to judge, was opened here this afternoon. I had indeed a sister, who fifteen years ago married against our father's will

and forsook his roof. 'Twas in the evil days of the war, and for a long time all trace of her was lost. Then word came roundabout, from a cousin of her husband's, that she was long since dead, somewhere in the West Country, and her husband shortly before. Troublous war times still, and my father an old man, and feeble. Naught was done to verify the tale. Now cometh this rogue McBride, and the gist of his tale thou hast heard."

"He spoke to save himself from chastisement," Captain Cleaves said thoughtfully.

"Ay, true," conceded Master Mayhew, "and under such stress a knave will say aught."

"Yet where is smoke, shall be some fire," cried Mistress Mayhew. "He had it not from Nance, the story that he told, with names so pat. Where else, then?"

"That is what I seek to know," said Master Mayhew.

"And the child's name, Blithe-in-Tribulation," urged Mistress Mayhew, "it savoureth not of Crocker's Lane, but is such as a mother bred amongst pious folk might well bestow."

"Again a point," said Master Mayhew, "yet not of overwhelming weight."

"But there is the likeness, too," spoke Mistress

Winwood, eagerly. "There it is for all to see."

"Thou art fond indeed," chided Master Mayhew. "'Twixt our sister's portrait and this child is no more likeness than betwixt any two lank black maids, with their hair awry. Or do you see this wondrous likeness, Roger?"

The Captain shook his head.

"How can I say? Before I looked, I had been told what I was to see."

"Oh, sir!" breathed Blithe, heartbroken.

"Rear not high hopes on so slender a foundation," bade Master Mayhew, and then, touched, it might be, by the stricken look on her face, he added, without prompting from his kinswomen, "Nay, be assured I shall sift this mad tale to the very bran. The *Trial* waiteth but a favouring wind for her homeward voyage. By hand of her master goeth a letter to mine agent in London, that biddeth him seek trace of Elizabeth Mayhew, who married with Giles Felton. We know now where to begin the search, and London is not so wide as all England. We shall wait news of Elizabeth and of the child 'tis said was hers. In six or seven months should we have an answer back from London, and meantime—"

"Ay," murmured Blithe. She was comforted to feel that the gentlewomen waited almost as breathless as she herself.

"Meantime," said Master Mayhew, as much to the elders as to Blithe, "is that knave McBride placed in ward. I shall see to't that he be not whipped, but bound to serve shall he be, so as I can lay hand on him at need. And thou, Blithe," he went on, "even as before I was half resolved, thou shalt go to my farm at Saybury, far removed from sight or hearing of thy precious so-called cousin."

"Away from Kitt, and all that make life kind?" besought Blithe, hardly crediting her ears.

"Oh, father!" Mistress Winwood began.

"Peace!" Master Mayhew checked her. "An the child be not what she longeth to be, 'tis cruel kindness to hold her here, indulged and made much of as she would be, for I know you women. An the child be what she hopeth—and we all hope," he added, after a moment, and for that saying, Blithe forgave him everything, "'twill do her no harm, to pass the summer in an upland town."

Mistress Mayhew softly snorted, but she said nothing.

"Thou wilt have work in plenty," Master Mayhew concluded. "The better to keep thee from idle dreams and profitless."

"Indeed, I shall be diligent," vowed Blithe. "And ye shall see, ay, truly shall ye all see by

my bearing that in sooth my parents"—she paused, afraid lest she say too much—"that they were honest folk," she ended softly. "Ye shall see."

"Ay, so we shall," said Mistress Winwood, ringingly, "and shall be proud of thee, I dare maintain."

CHAPTER XV

TALE OUT OF CROCKER'S LANE

SO it was settled that Blithe was to go to Master Mayhew's farm at Saybury, where his dead wife's brother, Wensley Bicknell, and his wife Bethia, that was aunt to Delia Sedgwick, ruled the roost. Within the month Master Mayhew was going thither on business of the farm, and Blithe and Delia were to travel in his charge.

Meantime Blithe counted like a miser every golden day that she passed in the house on Windmill Hill. Subtly she felt that her position was altered, since that tale of Gerritt McBride's had opened the door to hope. Try as they might to follow Master Mayhew's orders, the gentlewomen treated her with a difference that was trifling but dear. Out of her own purse Mistress Mayhew furnished her with necessary garments, simple enough, but new and seemly. Mistress Winwood watched her with fond eyes, and more than once checked herself in plans that began with the sentence:

"In the autumn, when the letters come from England, and thou art with us once again!"

As to old Nance, she showed her devotion to Mistress Elizabeth by making cakes for the child that perhaps was Mistress Elizabeth's child.

Oh, yes! Blithe, once of Crocker's Lane, was shrewd enough to see the wisdom and even the justice in Master Mayhew's decision to pack her off to the farm at Saybury, before she was spoiled for service, if service perhaps were to be her lot in life.

She could not help noticing, too, that she was pretty closely kept in the house and the garden. She was never allowed to run the streets unattended. Quickly she put two and two together. From Moll she had learned that Gerritt McBride, convicted of theft in open court, had been sold for a three-year term of service to one Lambert Barefoot, a shipwright of Roxbury. Then it was not beyond possibility that she should meet with Gerritt in the streets of Boston and that she should meet with him was, as she suspected, the last thing in Master Mayhew's mind.

To tell the truth, Blithe had no mad desire to meet with Gerritt. Indeed she was a little out of humour with him. From no love to her, she felt, but only to save his skin, he had told that story, weighty with consequence, that he might

just as well have told her years before. Still, though she was not eager to see him, she was very eager to hear his story in full, and to know on what she was to ground those high hopes that she had been so wisely counselled not to rear. But the days ran on, until it was only three days to the day when, weather permitting, Blithe was to set out for Saybury, and still she had not set eyes on Gerritt, nor heard another word of his story.

Then, one afternoon, when the gentlewomen had gone to drink a cup of posset with their cousin, Mistress Throdingham, in Spring Lane, and Moll had leave to spend an hour with her mother on the South Cove, Blithe left old Nance, dozing by the kitchen hearth, and went out with Kitt into the garden behind the house. A pleasant spot it was, enclosed with high green palings, and set with gooseberry and currant bushes, sweet briar and English roses. Here in neat beds grew all manner of garden herbs and sallets, in their season, and here, too, throve the lowly pumpkin vine and clambering bean. At the foot of the garden was a little orchard of pear and apple trees, that by this time had shed their blossoms.

In the dappled shade of the orchard Blithe sat down with her knitting, while Kitt, at a little distance, on the edge of the garden, shaped cakes out of mud, and offered them on a shingle to a

couple of dolls, made of corn-cobs, and a billet of wood, wrapped in a clout. Very happy and peaceful it was in the garden. Blithe crooned to herself the tune of "*Early one Morning*," and then lost the thread of her tune. For, glancing up, she saw a lithe young figure coming toward her from the kitchen door, and recognised it instantly.

"Gilbert!" she cried. "'Tis thou?"

The boy stayed her, when she would have risen, and cast himself down on the short grass beside her.

"I was fain to have a word with thee," he spoke hurriedly. "I had an hour's leave, and by happy chance found in the house yonder none but an old dame, who seemeth a good friend to thee."

"That is old Nance," said Blithe. "But all are kind."

He looked at her sharply.

"Belike. Yet they keep thee close. We have sought thee oft in the streets, and sought in vain."

"We?" she questioned.

"Ay," he answered. "My friend, thy cousin Gerritt, and I."

Blithe's heart grew troubled. She knew that Gerritt was no good friend for a young lad.

"How camest thou to knowledge of Gerritt McBride?" she asked.

"Why," said Gilbert, "my time is bought for one called Joel Diffy, who hath a farm inland, in a town called Doncaster. 'Twas his cousin, Lambert Barefoot, made the purchase for him, and with Lambert Barefoot I am to stay, until Goodman Diffy sendeth to fetch me. And meantime is Gerritt McBride sold for three years unto Lambert Barefoot. So cometh it that Gerritt McBride and I are bondmen beneath the same roof, and happy am I that it falleth so, for he is a gallant fellow, truth, and hath rare tales to tell of the tawny-skins 'mongst whom he hath dwelt."

"Learn not too readily of Gerritt!" Blithe advised.

Gilbert scarcely heeded the words.

"Now come I to the heart of my matter," he went on. "Gerritt hath a tale he held that thou shouldst hear, and misdoubting that he should himself be suffered approach thee, and learning roundabout that thou'lt speedily be packed off to Saybury, he hath prayed me seek thee and set it forth. 'Tis to thy profit, he doth swear, and well thou knowest, Blithe, that for thy profit I would venture much."

Blithe hesitated only for a second. After all, no direct command had been laid upon her, not to listen to words of Gerritt's, and she herself was very human!

"Tell me!" she begged.

Then in the garden, full of fragrance and of peace, Gilbert hastily set forth the sad and stormy tale that he had learned from Gerritt McBride.

"Gerritt saith: Tell Blithe that this was the way it fell, as oft have I heard it from my grandam, and thereto she said: 'Stand thou friend unto the child, and tell her all, if I be not alive, when she is come to ripe years.'

"Now my grandam was dwelling fourteen years or so ago in Crocker's Lane, with Roaring Tim, and his brother Patrick, my father, that was not yet hanged, and her son Philip's wife, an honest country wench called Meg, Phil being himself but newly dead. Of a mirky twilight my grandam went forth to buy a farthing candle in Fleet Street. There she met with a gentlewoman, stumbling and moaning, and by good hap recognised in her the young Mistress Elizabeth Mayhew, whom she had nursed aforetime at Rodman's Chace. So she had Mistress Elizabeth home with her to Crocker's Lane, hard by, that being the nearest shelter, and there she learned of the poor lady that, her husband Captain Felton being dead, she was going to her kindred at Buckton-le-Grand, though they knew not of her coming.

"At the house in Crocker's Lane, with my

grandam and Phil's Meg attending, was a daughter born to Mistress Elizabeth, whom she called by the name of Blithe-in-Tribulation, mindful of her own sad fortunes. Ten days later, she, poor lady, died.

"Then my grandam and Meg cared for the orphan babe, and, it being seen in Meg's arms, folk held it to be her child, and so she let them think. For my grandam durst not convey the child to its grandparents at Buckton-le-Grand, because of a purse of gold, and rare jewels that Mistress Elizabeth bore about her, and they seized and spent by Roaring Tim. My grandam feared, poor soul, lest being questioned for the theft, she and all her household be held to blame for the gentlewoman's death, so she kept silent. But she lessoned me, as a young lad, that when I was man-grown, I should find the child's kindred, and tell this story, and shame to me it is, and all my misfortunes well deserved, that I have not told it sooner.

"There!" Gilbert ended. He drew a long breath, as one wearied. "Such is Gerritt's story that he told to Master Mayhew, and will maintain is truth."

"I am much beholden to Gerritt," Blithe spoke slowly. She met Gilbert's questioning eyes.

"'Tis like to be well with thee, Blithe, I

judge," he said. "Indeed, I am glad at heart, for none deserve better."

"Thou art kind," she answered. "But what shall come of all this coil, time alone can show."

Then they must part, for Gilbert's leave was short. Cheerily enough, he said farewell.

"Of a truth the Massachusetts are not so wide," he said. "One day I shall see thee in thy new state, perchance, as niece to Master Mayhew, and when I see thee, I shall have to my credit gallant adventures, or I much mistake."

Head up, and whistling, Gilbert went his way.

For the moment Blithe almost forgot Kitt, while she thought over the story that she had heard. To herself she did not speak so cautiously and doubtfully as she had spoken to Gilbert. So plausible she held the story, so possible, that she felt the whole world must see it to be true. Light-hearted, she took Kitt upon her back, and pranced like a steed of mettle into the house.

"Dear heart!" said Mistress Winwood, gentle as she always was in these days, and took her laughing rogue from Blithe's fond arms. "To think but three days more, and thou art hence!"

"Nay, dear mistress," Blithe smiled upon her, almost as if she were herself a younger sister, "the days of summer, why, they will speed by like any dream."



CHAPTER XVI

JOURNEY'S END

WEATHER permitted! In vain Blithe had prayed that storms and tempests might hinder her departure from Boston. She concluded that Master Mayhew, who was very eager, as she knew, to make the journey to Saybury, had more power at prayer than she.

On the third day, then, after Gilbert's memorable visit, Blithe said a brave farewell to the people in the house on Windmill Hill. She kissed away Kitt's tears. She pocketed the cake that old Nance slyly gave her, and off she went once more to strangers in a strange land. At least she went with Master Mayhew, whom she trusted. She went also with Delia Sedgwick, but this latter companion she could very well have spared.

"So the Mayhews have wearied of thee already," Delia greeted Blithe, but out of range, you may be sure, of Master Mayhew's ears.

"And it seemeth also have your Boston kindred wearied of you," Blithe retorted.

"I go of mine own will," bridled Delia.

That she did not, as Blithe knew from words that Mistress Mayhew had let fall. Were not the Sedgwicks on Cotton Hill sorely wearied of their young kinswoman from beyond seas, and fearful lest with her flaunting of vain garments and her light carriage, she should lay herself and them open to a reproof from the Elder or even from the magistrates?

Something of Blithe's disbelief Delia must have read in Blithe's eyes. She hastened to add:

"To be sure, my hard-visaged cousins were somewhat jealous of my poor silks and braveries such as they had never dreamed on. Indeed I leave them without tears. 'Twill be otherwise, I trow, at mine aunt's great house in the country."

Had Delia learned nothing, then, in the four weeks that she had passed in Massachusetts? Sorely Blithe was tempted to say to her:

"The country house, as well I know, is nothing but a border farm, and your aunt to whom ye go but a pensioner upon the bounty of him who is perhaps mine uncle."

But Blithe held back the silly words. She would not be in her turn a boaster.

"And when we come to our journey's end," went on Delia, "'twill speedily be seen who of us is mistress and who is maid."

"Haply," said Blithe.

Indeed, if she had let herself brood, she might have made herself quite unhappy by wondering how she should fare with Delia, to her misfortune, niece to the family where she was to serve. But taking thought, Blithe had wisely concluded, profited nothing. So she gave herself, with heart and eyes, to the enjoyment of the strangeness and the beauty of the journey on which she went.

At the ferry on Mill Point they boarded, all three, with modest bundles—too modest, complained Delia, mindful of gew-gaws that she had had to leave behind!—a shallop of Master Mayhew's, guided by two of his servants. In the shallop, with the wind to favour them, they travelled up the broad river Charles. Soon the broad river grew a narrow river, where they crept beneath the green, wooded shores of Cambridge, on which stood the young college of Harvard. Between banks that always narrowed, yet still were sweetly wooded, or, in the open reaches, sown with the white flowers of the strawberry vine, they came in the afternoon to the village of Watertown.

That night they spent at the house of people that were friends of Master Mayhew's. Delia Sedgwick, who talked much of the state that she had kept in England, was greatly admired by the younger sort. Blithe, however, found a baby

to tend, and a grandmother's needle to thread, and wished from her heart that this was the home where she was to stay.

Next day they made their journey on two horses that they had hired of their entertainers. Delia rode on a pillion behind Master Mayhew, while Blithe was perched behind the serving-lad who should later fetch home the horses. Speedily she was friends with him, and as they jogged along the rough and narrow woodland road, where the air was spiced with the breath of pines, she learned much from his talk.

There was no underwood, save in the swamps and low grounds that were always wet, because 'twas custom of the tawnies to burn the woods, for their convenience in hunting. But great trees of all sorts she would find, ay, oak and cedar and elm, and all manner of nut trees. Wild roses she could see for herself grew by the wayside, and blue flower de luce in the lowlands. Violets and Salamon's Seal were by, but presently the honeysuckle would flower.

He was ready to wager, that serving-lad, that she had never tasted yet of pompion or isquoterosh, nor yet of water-melon, wholesome vegetables, all three, that the white men had found in the Indian fields, and had learned to grow for



Journey's End

III

themselves. He doubted, too, if she yet had eat much of Indian corn.

"But thou'lt know the taste of it right soon," he chuckled, "an thou dwell'st in Goodman Bicknell's house. Samp thou'lt have most times to thy portion."

But for all this dismal prophecy, Blithe found the youth good company, and the journey pleasant. Only one untoward incident there was to mar the morning. As they rounded a turn in the road, they overtook and passed an Indian, first of the tawny race that Blithe had seen.

It was nothing to Blithe that the white men exchanged greetings with the savage, and that the serving-lad told her that he was a harmless creature from Elder Eliot's village of praying Indians. With the repulsion that some people feel at sight of a snake, Blithe shrank from the tawny. She loathed his dark skin, and beady eyes, and the soiled and scanty covering of skins that was his dress. She read his grunts, meant in all friendliness, to be threats. She fell silent, clinging fast to her companion, nor did she breathe freely till they halted for their noon meal at a wayside tavern, and she found herself safely surrounded with white folk.

As soon as the horses were rested and re-

freshed, the travellers made ready to ride on again. This did not at all please Delia. Tired and fretful, she began to complain:

"Oh, I loathe this land, and all that is herein!"

"Vain wench," said Master Mayhew, "'tis unseemly thus to speak of God's creation."

When she bemoaned herself again, he checked her sternly:

"Peace! Remember that women as tender as thou, ay, but of better heart and courage, have borne more hardship in this land than ever thou hast dreamed on."

Hearing these words, Blithe wondered if he thought of his own dead wife, that was Mistress Winwood's mother, and to herself she vowed never to complain.

The afternoon was warm and sultry, with the sky overcast with clouds that threatened tempest. The road was rougher even than in the morning, but the riders urged the horses as much as they dared. The last mile, in fact, they made at full speed, as they raced with the oncoming storm.

Happily the way now led down hill. Below them, through the branches of trees, Blithe caught glimpses of cleared fields, circled with the virgin forest, and of houses, strung along a single street. Instinctively she looked for some building with a tower or a belfry, before she remembered



that the Puritans, who did not believe in such vanities, built their meeting houses much as other houses.

By that time they were trotting heavily up the village street, under the first great, sullen splashes of rain. A poor frontier village this was, thought Blithe. Here were houses built of rough-hewn logs, to which the bark still clung, and roofed with thatch. Here were geese that roamed the street at will, and dogs that barked at the sound of horse-hoofs, and people that flocked to their doors, as if the sight of strangers were a rarity.

On they hurried through the rain, past houses some of which were of better sort, of two stories, clayboarded, and roofed with thin shingles. Into the yard of such a house, that stood farthest a-field of all the Saybury houses, and was flanked with its outbuildings, the travellers turned at last. No more than damped with the rain, they had reached their goal just in the nick of time.

Speedily they were gathered in the huge kitchen, that filled at least half of the ground floor of the house. Only a little light in that hour of tempest came through the small windows, yet dimly could be made out a fireplace, vast enough almost for roasting an ox, rough-hewn tables and stools, a dresser with trenchers and bowls of wood, a chest of drawers, a smoky ceiling, festooned

with strings of onions and dried apples, that were diminished by the winter's use.

Gathered in the gloom, so it seemed to Blithe's fancy, were half a score or so of boys, who were bare-legged and wild as savages, in coarse shirts and leathern breeches. The mother of this tribe, a gaunt, sun-tanned woman, with black eyes, had greeted Master Mayhew by the name of brother.

"The goodman is hence, and Jerad gone with him," she said, "in quest of cattle that have strayed, and thanks be to Heaven, if they be not stolen of the thievish tawnies."

Blithe thought she meant that the white men, not the cattle, were in danger of being stolen, and she felt her heart quake with fear.

"So these are the maids," went on Goodwife Bicknell. With a face of gloom she looked at the two weary girls. "Wellawell! I could find work for half a dozen such. Go up yon stair! Lay off your hoods! Ye'll share the room together."

At this calm coupling of them, Delia lifted her drooping crest.

"Good Mistress Bethia Bicknell," said she, "I am your niece."

"I'll use thee none the worse on that account," the farm-wife answered.

"And this wench," went on Delia, "is but a

bondmaid. I'll not lie in one chamber with her."

"Tilly-vally!" spoke Goodwife Bicknell. "Here are no hundred rooms, as in kings' houses. Thou'lt e'en lie where I bid thee, or lie in the barn upon straw. And now, brother," she turned to Master Mayhew, "what's the news Bostonward?"

Blithe caught up her bundle, and turned to the rude stair that was almost as steep as a ladder. At her heels she knew by the sound that Delia stumbled. Up she went into the hot, dim space above, and through a doorway, where the rude door stood open, into a slant-roofed chamber, where for sole furnishing was a wide bed, with a mattress of straw.

"So here is our journey's end," said Blithe, half aloud.

Stepping to the narrow window, she looked out. On this side of the house she could see only raw, half-cleared fields and the dreary forest, veiled with the desolate downpour of the summer rain. With a sense of utter depression, she turned from the window. Then she beheld Delia Sedgwick, the erstwhile haughty, stretched face down on the rude bed, and sobbing as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER XVII

DIFFY OF DONCASTER

ONLY for a moment Blithe hesitated. Then she went to the bedside, and laid a hand on Delia's heaving shoulder.

"Mistress," she spoke. She had to raise her voice, in order to be heard above the crash of the rain that beat upon the roof. "Good mistress! Prithee, do not weep! Bad beginning maketh oft good ending and—"

Delia lifted a tear-swollen face, and with a pettish movement shrugged aside Blithe's hand.

"How darest thou so to bespeak me?" she whimpered. "Haply thou thinkest thyself to be somewhat. Oh, rare tales did I gather from silly Moll! Ay, worshipful young Mistress Felton, forsooth! That is the least style to which thou'lt aspire. And for that thou wouldst venture to fumble me with thy paws, as if we were equal!"

For a second Blithe felt her face and all her body burn as if with fire, to hear her secret, darling hopes dragged in this brazen fashion into the

light of day. She could have tongue-lashed Delia roundly in the jargon of Crocker's Lane. But she did not do so, for suddenly she remembered how Mistress Mayhew would have spoken in such a case, and perhaps she was a niece of Mistress Mayhew's. She drew herself erect. She was fairly smiling.

"Why, ye poor creature," she said. "I did but compassionate you, and would fain have helped you. Be sure I shall not so offend again."

Then she laid off her hood, smoothed her hair, tucked up her skirt above her petticoat, and without another glance at Delia went down the steep stair into the kitchen.

"Art ready for work, I see," was Goodwife Bicknell's greeting. "Well, here is work, and to spare."

In the next hour Blithe learned how to lay the table, and whence to fetch the home-brewed beer, and when to stir the hominy, which boiled in a great kettle over the fire that spat and sizzled beneath the fall of rain through the wide-mouthed chimney.

Moreover, while she bustled hither and thither, Blithe managed to learn the names of the many sons with whom Goodwife Bicknell was blessed. After all, there were only six of them, counting Jerad, who came in with his father, very wet,

after hunting for the cattle. From fourteen to four the sturdy rogues ran—Seth, Jerad, David, Waken, Watching, and Nicholas. They seemed shy and rustic, but not unfriendly. As for Goodman Bicknell, he was a silent, discouraged-seeming man, and short-spoken, yet he showed as an angel of light to one who had grown up with Roaring Tim, while Goodwife Bicknell, for all that she made a body step briskly, stepped even more briskly herself.

"Here I shall have to work hard," thought Blithe, "but I am not afraid of work. And I could win these folk to be friendly, but oh, I know not what Delia Sedgwick will say to my discredit."

For Blithe had no illusions as to Delia. She knew that she entered on this new life at Saybury, with an enemy in the house, a vain, selfish, spiteful girl, who would do her best to work her harm.

Had it not been for Delia, Blithe would not have found life at the Bicknells' altogether unpleasant. Of course there was plenty of work for all. From daybreak to sunset, there were baking and brewing, carding and spinning, cleaning and churning, young stock to tend, chickens to rear, berries to pick, gardens to weed, and, when all else failed, stockings to knit in every spare moment. Yet the country, to eyes that, like

Blithe's, were weary of gazing on foul streets, was lovely, with its lush green fields, under blue skies of June, its virgin forests, its flashes of red lilies on the uplands. And the Bicknell boys were friendly souls. Yes, life would have been pleasant, had it not been for Delia.

Over the light tasks that were given her, Delia whined and sulked. She dared not answer back to her aunt, after one sharp encounter, but often she unbridled her tongue, when she was alone with Blithe. Plainly, however, she somewhat curbed her malice, because of the presence of Master Mayhew. But when he went back to Boston, at the end of a week, Blithe felt that she might hold herself prepared for anything. She did not have to wait long.

Only a morning or two after Master Mayhew's departure, Jerad, who was of Blithe's own age, and David, who was next younger, waylaid her, as she was hurrying with a pail of skimmed milk to the calf-house.

"Is't true, Blithe," began Jerad, "that thou wert in London companion to thieves?"

Blithe hesitated only for a moment. "Tell truth, and shame the devil!" Mistress Mayhew, who was her aunt, perhaps, once had bidden her.

"Ay, 'tis true," she said.

"Canst speak thieves' talk?" queried David.

Blithe nodded.

"Teach it us!" cried Jerad.

Blithe laughed, feeling herself ten years his elder, but she shook her head.

"I'll show thee where is a red-wing's nest," proffered David.

"I'll teach thee all the tawnies' words I know," urged Jerad.

To him, as the elder, Blithe spoke out:

"I will teach you no such matter for naught ye can offer. They are vile folk I was bred amongst, all save my granny, and happy am I to be fled from them, and would forget them, and sorry I am that ye have heard of them."

"'Twas Delia told us," said David. "She told us all about thee yesterday."

Jerad knit his sunburned brows.

"I like her not," he said, "for all she be my cousin. 'Tis scurvily done, to bear tales of another. My father would lam a lad did so."

Blithe felt her heart warm toward him.

"Whenever I have leisure," she promised, as she poured the milk into the calves' trough, "I'll tell you all that befell on shipboard, and of a lad, but little elder than thou, Jerad, that was stow-away. All manner things I'll tell you gladly, but not of Crocker's Lane."

There was a pause.

"I'll show 'ee red-wing's nest, just the same," said David, suddenly.

That same morning, while Blithe was in the midst of butter-making, and coming on not so badly, Goodwife Bicknell all at once asked the question:

"Tell me, art thou truly come of thievish kin in London?"

"Ay," said Blithe. "'Twas for that I left them."

"Well," said Goodwife Bicknell, "if thou hast contented my brother Mayhew, no reason thou shouldst not content me. Tell 'ee fairly, child, I would welcome here any daughter of the Jebusites, yea, even of the Philistines, who, like thou, was willing and nimble to serve me. Twelve-month long have I been here, with none of female kind to lend me a hand's turn, and afore that had I naught but a wild squaw out of the wood, who fled back into the wood, and my best red petticoat and my copper kettle in her tawny paws, the hussy!"

"I vow I'll never steal your kettle, goodwife," Blithe promised soberly.

"Little thou'dst find to steal, wert thou so minded, and that's mere truth," the woman sighed.

In that same hour she spoke to Blithe further, like one who yearned for a listener:

"Too much is here to do, I sometimes think. 'Twas otherwise when my brother Mayhew farmed the land for himself. But now seeketh my man to till land of his own, and the Mayhew land thereto. No man can do work of two men, and the lads not half grown. I know not how 'twill end."

Blithe looked at the tired woman, with eyes of sympathy.

"Let me ply the churn for my part," she said. "Next time, I know, I can do't all fairly."

"Thou'rt a kind wench," Goodwife Bicknell answered, "wherever thou hast had thine upbringing."

So the people at Saybury were friendly, all but Delia, and Delia's spiteful tales, it seemed, had worked Blithe not a bit of harm, but even good. Blithe felt that this day, hot and hard though it was, should be marked with a white stone. But the memorable happenings of the day were not yet over.

As the household gathered round the big bowl of samp, or Indian porridge, that was by custom the evening meal, there loomed in the open doorway the figure of a man, big, powerful, unshaven, with a brutal jaw.

"I be loath to trouble you, Wensley Bicknell," he said, with a civility of phrase that the morose-

ness of his voice and manner contradicted. "I have broken a trace on a long haul, and must crave a neighbour's help."

Goodman Bicknell rose from his place, and went with the stranger to the stable, where odd bits of leather were to be found.

"Hope he stayeth not to eat," muttered Seth, the taciturn eldest son.

"Why not?" cried Delia. "Aught of change is welcome in this drear place."

"A' is sourest curmudgeon in all Massachusetts," Seth retorted.

"Speak no evil," his mother rebuked him.

"A' is not of Saybury," said Jerad, as if that fact were comforting. "A' is of Doncaster, and Doncaster folk are naught."

At that name Blithe pricked up her ears, though for the moment she could not remember where she had heard it.

"Goodwife," she asked, "how is he called, yon man?"

"Joel Diffy," Goodwife Bicknell answered. "He holdeth his seventy good acres in Doncaster."

Then Blithe remembered. It was to Joel Diffy of Doncaster that Gilbert Vaughan's time had been sold, and Joel Diffy, said Seth Bicknell, was the sourest curmudgeon in all Massachusetts.

She remembered how Gilbert had gone whistling from the garden, on that June day of their parting, hopeful, as he had told her, of gallant adventures, and for pity of poor Gilbert, bound to such a master, she felt that she could easily have wept.



CHAPTER XVIII

NEWS FROM BOSTON

BLITHE had been a-berrying, one warm day in late July. Brown as a berry she was herself, a healthy little frontiers-woman, hardened with weeks of living half out of doors, in the pine-sweet air of the Massachusetts that she grew to love. She walked in moccasins, because she wished to save her good leather shoes for Sundays, and with bare ankles, because of the heat. She had kilted her skirt of homespun almost to the knee, and bared her brown throat to whatever air was abroad. Over her rough locks she wore no more than a kerchief bound.

As she walked along the narrow trail beneath the fir trees, she knit at a long stocking of yarn. So skilful was she, with constant practice, that she did not need to watch the flying needles, but could let her eyes range to count the white clouds in the glistening blue sky, or compute at what date the green or ruddy berries on the brambles should be black and ripe for eating.

At her heels Waken and Watching, small and serious and sunbrowned, carried between them the great pail of whortleberries that they had helped her to gather. When the berries were dried, would Mother perhaps use some of them in a boiled pudding, they questioned hopefully? Such a pudding was a dainty indeed to these little frontiers-children.

To lighten the way, Blithe began telling them the old English tale of Jack the Giant-Killer.

As they came out from the bit of wood that lay between the village and the uplands where the whortleberries grew, there met them, lightly stepping in moccasins and loin-cloth, a young Indian, bound about his own concerns.

"Greeting, Sequasson," spoke Waken, promptly.

The tawny grunted, and passed on.

But Blithe dropped a stitch and lost the thread of her story.

"Blithe's afeard o' Sequasson," jeered Watching, "and he but a tame Indian, and known to us all."

"Why be'st afeard o' the tawnies?" asked Waken.

"I am not," Blithe answered, reddening. "They are but men, as others."

"What wilt thou do, come winter," went on

Waken, "when we find often three or four lusty savages sleeping on our hearth, when we rise in the morning? My father leaveth the latch string out, on cold nights, as do all the neighbours."

In her heart Blithe gave thanks that, when winter came, she should be safe again in Boston town. The reason she had given up trying to find, but the fact remained that she was afraid of the savages. She felt her very flesh creep, when, as often happened, they came trading or begging to Goodman Bicknell's door.

With the blue day a little dimmed, because of her fear and the shameful fact that she could not conceal it, Blithe crossed the wide, hot fields, and came to the house. There she found the Bicknell family in great excitement.

"My fowling-piece hath come," Seth cried, as soon as he saw her, and Blithe rejoiced with him, whole-heartedly.

In the spring of the year Seth had trapped and slain a wolf, and with the bounty that the General Court had offered for the head of every such beast, he had, with his father's permission, sent to buy in Boston a fowling-piece, all his own. Now the fowling-piece had come, with a barrel of molasses for the Bicknells, and various goods for the neighbours, on an ox-wain, slowly guided

the long road from Boston by Neighbour Simeon Fernald.

Seth showed his new possession eagerly to his brothers, who were so openly desirous to own the like, that Goodwife Bicknell had to warn them:

"Thou shalt not covet!"

Only Delia, who was dawdling over the great mess of pease that she had been told to shell, must needs be scornful. Strange how Delia always sought to steal the pleasure from the small events of the day!

"Why, that poor piece is naught," she said. "Ye should have seen the rack of guns that my father kept for fowling in our great house in the country. Our very servants bore as good as that. My father—"

"Thy father be shot!" Jerad leaped to the defence of his brother's scorned treasure. "I am fair sick of hearing of the great state thou didst keep in England. Pity thou didst not bide there, where thou wert so well esteemed!"

Goodwife Bicknell opened her lips to rebuke her son, but before she could speak, Delia had burst into ready tears.

"Oh! Oh! So to insult the memory of my father! Thou rude, unmannered, rustic clown! I would I were anywhere else but in thy house indeed!"

"Hold thy peace!" bade Goodwife Bicknell.

"Here thou art, and here thou'lt bide, worse luck for me!" Losing her temper at last, for the day was hot, and Delia most exasperating, she went on, "And give me no words hereafter over thy state in England. Well enough I know my brother Tom was no more than steward on that great estate thou seemest to boast to have been his own."

"O aunt!" wailed Delia, stricken.

"Ay, my fine mistress," pursued the goodwife, "servant was thy father, no better, to good Sir Richard Knollys. So let's have no more of these great airs, and this scorning of those as good as thyself."

So this was the sole basis of all Delia's boastful tales—tales that were never told, as Blithe remembered, in the presence of Mistress Mayhew, who no doubt would promptly have challenged their truth. Blithe was neither glad nor sorry. She had grown merely to despise Delia, as a poor, helpless creature, but at least she did not grin unpityingly at sight of Delia's angry tears, as did the Bicknell lads.

"Come, come!" bade Goodwife Bicknell. "No need to steep the pease in salt water. And thou, Seth, bethink thee! In thy prattle of thy fowl-

ing-piece thou hast clean forgot to give Blithe her letter."

"What! A letter for me?" cried Blithe, in amazement.

"Ay, truth," Seth answered. "Here is one for my father, from mine uncle Mayhew, and one for thee also, come by hand of Simeon Fernald."

Hastily Blithe took from Seth the letter, which was the first that ever she had received. She tucked it into her apron pocket, and fell to knitting, with her face a trifle red.

"Why dost thou not read?" asked Goodwife Bicknell, curiously.

"She cannot," Delia lifted up her head to sneer. "Was she not bred in Crocker's Lane, where maids are lessoned in far other lore? Only gentlefolk can read, as well ye know."

Goodwife Bicknell looked the speaker through.

"Sayst thou so?" she queried. "Nay, hang not thine head, Blithe! Myself, I cannot read a word, so am not of the gentry, according to this delicate madam who deigneth to dwell with us. But my lads are better skilled. Jerad, do thou leave fondling of thy brother's fowling-piece, and spell out for the maid her letter."

It was hard indeed for Blithe to have the precious missive read aloud in the kitchen, with the eager lads, and hostile Delia, and Goodwife Bick-

nell, curious though kindly, drinking in every word. But there was no help for it. Jerad perched at the table, with his elbows spread and his nose near the sheet, while word by word he slowly deciphered the letter:

GOOD BLITHE:

I write by this sure hand to greet thee, and wish thee well, and assure thee that thou art not out of our remembrance. Kitt prateth still of her dear Bly. Diligent thou hast been these weeks, I doubt not, mindful of thy promise. Be still so, and let me whisper, haply shall I come myself to see how thou dost speed.

"Oh!" cried Blithe aloud, and for the moment ceased to knit.

Jerad spelt slowly on:

As my father writeth to mine uncle Bicknell, 'tis in my mind, when September is come, myself, for old remembrance' sake, to go to Saybury, where once I was of old, and little Kitt with me, that she be acquaint with her cousins, whom I hear to be towardly lads. Till that day, bear thyself well, and account me ever thy friend

CICELY WINWOOD.

"And what," sighed Goodwife Bicknell, "am I to do, say, with two more to tend on in this house? None the less, she is a good soul, my niece Cicely, and vaunteth not herself, as do some, with less excuse, that I might name."

Blithe said nothing, merely knit the faster, and,

that she might not seem like mewling Delia, kept her eyes cast down, so that none might see in them the tears that gathered fast for sheer gladness. Mistress Winwood and little Kitt were coming to Saybury! Oh, it was good beyond believing! What did it matter that the long, hot month of August was still to be lived through before the day of their coming? She could bear anything with such a goal in sight.

Then, because she feared lest her eyes might brim over, she stole out with her knitting, and slipped into such hiding place as the open shed, that sheltered the huge logs of firewood, allowed her. There Jerad came presently to seek her.

"Have back thy letter," he said awkwardly.

"I thank thee that thou didst read," Blithe assured him, quite steadied.

"There was more thereto," the boy spoke softly. "'Twas in a postscript, and I held it be-like a private matter."

"Thou art good!" she breathed.

"Thus it ran," he told her. "'G. M. hath lately beaten his master, and fled away, none knoweth whither, but 'tis thought to southward.'"

"G. M.?" she said.

"What meaneth it?" he asked.

"It may mean naught," she answered him, somewhat troubled, "or it may mean much."

"Well," said Jerad, "if he be friend of thine, this G. M., may he show 'em a clean pair o' heels! 'Tis no jesting matter, thou knowest, for a servant to flee from his master. Public scourging, ay, and added years of service, that's the best he can look for, if once they take him."

Jerad went out of the shed. Then Blithe took her letter, and, for all that it was a dear possession, come as it was from Mistress Winwood's hand, for Gerritt McBride's unworthy sake that was mentioned in it, she tore it into a score of fragments and ground them deep into the litter of the shed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FUGITIVE

THE sultry days of August had gone the way of good things and of bad. September queened it now upon the Saybury hills, garlanded with woodbine and flushed with the red of sumac.

In the marshes cranberries were ripening. Waken and Watching counted the days till the day when they might eat of a first mess, stewed with sugar. In the forest the burrs of chestnuts and of hickory nuts were swelling. Jerad and David counted the time till, with the frost to help them, they might fill their sacks. Seth looked forward to the first snowfall and a rabbit hunting, with his treasured fowling-piece. Blithe looked forward—but to what should she look forward, other than the coming of Mistress Winwood and little Kitt?

She had received no second letter from Boston, but she had not expected a second. She was not greedy of good fortune, and she had enough to dream of, only in recalling the contents of that one letter. Endlessly she wondered what she should

do and say, and what would be said to her, when Mistress Winwood was among them.

She wondered, too, and sadly, how it had sped with Gerritt McBride. Had he been retaken? Indeed, for his sake, threatened with such cruel punishment, she prayed not. Had he reached shelter somewhere, never again to come within the jurisdiction of Massachusetts? If such were the case, how might his flight perhaps affect her fortunes? But she cheered herself with the thought that his tale was already told, and it would be confirmed, she hoped, by blessed news from London in the autumn ships.

So the days had run to the days of September. The noontides were sunsteeped. The nights that lengthened gave a hint of crisp weather soon to follow. Already Goodwife Bicknell had a careful eye on squashes and pumpkins, and began to question when the first frosts would nip the garden.

Then one afternoon Blithe was sent on an errand. She was to carry a bag of grey goose-feathers to Goodwife Tarbox, at the outermost other end of Saybury, and bring back in exchange a parcel of green bayberry candles. Away hurried Blithe, with the sack of feathers bound on her shoulders, so that she might have her hands free for the eternal knitting.

She was delayed longer than she had expected to be by Goodwife Tarbox, who was a notable gossip. When she headed homeward, with her candles, she thought that she could make up lost time by following a dim cow-track, instead of the beaten path that led through Saybury Street. To be sure, in going this way, she should have to cross a swampy place, which the street bent round, but she knew herself nimble and sure-footed, and time besides was precious.

She crossed the swamp in safety and plunged into the wood beyond. The sun was almost setting, and among the trees she had to give up her knitting and watch her feet upon the darkling path. Unpleasantly she grew aware that her ears were a-strain for the sound of a moccasined footfall. Of course she had nothing to fear from any of the tawny tribe, she kept assuring her heart, which beat too fast for comfort. But for all the assurances that she could make, she quickened her pace through the darkness of the cedar trees, and she cast every now and then a frightened glance across her shoulder.

Then she realised that she was being followed.

The open fields by Goodman Bicknell's house were still a quarter of a mile away. She had no breath, as she knew, to run that distance over so

rough a path. In her extremity she remembered that her father, whether he were Felton or McBride, was in either case a soldier. She halted in the path. She made herself face about. She fetched voice enough to speak.

"Who followeth me?" she called. "Stand forth, if thou be honest, nor fright a harmless maid."

For an instant, while she held her breath, she sensed that the rustling, which was so soft that it was scarcely a sound, had ceased. Then she grew even more afraid of the eerie silence, and was almost ready to run, when she saw a figure shape itself in the gloom of the path.

As soon as she saw the figure to wear shirt and breeches, she knew with heartfelt thankfulness that this was no savage. Almost in the same second she realised that it was the figure not of a man, but of a boy.

"Who is't?" she cried angrily. "Play me no further tricks, Seth Bicknell, if it be thou, or Jerad, or thou'lt come by a basting, I promise thee."

The figure still cowered dimly among the thick shadows of the trees.

"Blithe!" a voice hesitated, but for all that it called her by name, the voice was for the moment strange to her.

"Yes, I am Blithe," she said, half in fear of what might now be disclosed.

Then the figure shaped itself clearly from the shadows. She felt her wrists gripped by tense fingers, and, peering into her face, beheld the white face of Gilbert Vaughan.

"'Tis thou indeed," he said. "Oh, happy chance! Hast not forgot me, Blithe?"

"No," she answered. "Nor to whom thou wast sold. What ill chance now hath happened? Tell me quick!"

"The worst mischance in the world," he said. "'Twere better for me, they had strangled me at Tyburn. O Blithe, I have lifted hand against my master, and for such the law hath no mercy. I have struck him, and then I have fled for my very life, and more. Thou knowest him not, Blithe. Two days and a night have I lurked in the forest, half starving, and in fear. For if he take me—"

Blithe freed one hand from his hold, and laid it on his thinly-clad shoulder.

"I have seen thy master," she said, "and heard talk of him."

As she spoke, she visioned the face of Joel Diffy, which she had never forgotten. Moreover, through her head rang Jerad Bicknell's words: public scourging, and years of added

service were the penalty for the servant who smote his master.

"At any cost," she said, "Diffy must not take thee."

"But he will!" Gilbert repeated, shivering. "Thou knowest him not. He will take me, unless I have help to flee unto the westward savages. In all this land I have no friend but thee, and the fear I stand in thou knowest, and ever thou wert kind, and now—oh, for every sake, help me, Blithe! Help me! Help me!"

CHAPTER XX

LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

“**T**O be sure,” said Blithe, “I shall help thee, Gilbert.”

The words were simple enough to say, but in saying them Blithe stepped, as it were, through a door and closed it behind her.

“Now,” she bade, “calm thyself, and come slowly at my side, for I must not be too late at home, for fear of questions, and tell me orderly what hath befallen thee, even to the least particular.”

With his hand clutching her hand, and his elbow pressing her elbow, Gilbert came at her side, steadied, as she knew, by her steadiness, while swiftly he set forth his miserable tale.

“He is a hard man, thou knowest, and so esteemed of all. His wife goeth in fear of him, and his children likewise. He is cruel to all, even to the poor brute beasts, and that—oh, that fair doth sicken me! But I worked for him, Blithe. Indeed, I did my best without grudging, and I was never saucy. But yestermorn ’twas—

"We were in the stable, look 'ee. I made ready the gear for the harvest. His little maid, Joan, stood watching me. He was in the horse-stall, and the young horse belike trod on his foot, and angered him. I heard little Joan scream out. I turned, and I saw what he sought to do to the poor horse. Then was I holding to his throat, and the little maid screaming still, like she was mad, and he striking down at me—and that is all."

"Go on!" said Blithe. "There must be more."

"Perchance I swooned. I know that he struck more than once, and struck hard. When I came to myself, I lay in the corn-crib, and the door was made fast upon me. I knew what is the penalty for a servant who lifteth hand against his master. I lay dumb-like for half the morn. Then I looked again to the door, and it wavered ajar. Haply 'twas little Joan, a-tiptoe, had loosed the wooden bolt. Haply 'twas Goodwife Diffy herself. I stayed not, but forth, and crept from bush to bush, and along the wall into the wood.

"Then I bethought me, if I fell into the hands of the savages that lay at the back of Doncaster, they might sell me again unto my master, knowing me and knowing him, so I shaped my course southward, and as I travelled, I recalled how

southward lay Saybury, and 'twas thither thou wast gone, and if haply I could meet with thee! 'Twas a slight chance, sooth, but mine only chance. So I have lurked for hours here in this wood by Saybury, for I durst not venture into the settlement, and I have waited, and I have prayed for thy chance coming, and it seemeth Heaven hath heard my prayer."

They had come now, the boy and the girl, to the very edge of the wood, where the twilight fields began. At a little distance rose the dark bulk of the Bicknell house and barns and huddled outbuildings, with the forest for a sombre background. Over all brooded a dim sky, where the early stars shone pale.

"Time is short," said Blithe. "Whither wilt thou?"

"Westward," he answered, "to the savages on Connecticut, and so to the Dutch at New Amsterdam."

Thinking of the savages that were her dread, she shuddered.

"'Tis a desperate journey, Gilbert!"

"Mine only hope," he said. "And even that is quenched at the outset, unless—" he hesitated.

"Unless I furnish thee with what is needful," Blithe met the emergency, simply and without heroics. "What must thou have?"

"Some manner of gun, with powder and shot," he said. "A little food. For firing I can provide, with the steel of my knife, and the flint I carry, and dry wood ever to find. A warm doublet I could use, too, for the nights are cold, and I had to flee in my shirt, but let me have the gun, and only the gun, and I can make shift."

"I shall provide thee," Blithe promised. "Thou seest that outermost shed of Bicknell's farm? Draw thither, when the hour groweth late, and lurk there till dawn, or till my coming. Thou seest I have not time to run to the wood and bring thee what is needful. That much thou must venture, and I will not fail thee."

"Good Blithe!" he said, and pressed her hand close in his. "But canst thou? What will befall thee haply for the deed?"

"Naught." She told him what she knew was not the truth. "These folk are kind, and well affectioned to me. And now have done! I am late already. Forget not the place of meeting, and be patient."

Swiftly she walked on alone across the rough fields. She went, as it were, aloof from her body, while she planned, definitely and deliberately, what she should do to help Gilbert. She did not trouble to think what would be the consequences to herself, at which he had hinted. Neither did

she let herself think of the wrong that she should do to people who had, in the main, been kind to her.

Poor child, reared up in Crocker's Lane, she could not, at this pinch, forget the lessons learned in Crocker's Lane. She never dreamed of going to Goodman Bicknell or the goodwife, and telling them about Gilbert, and the danger in which he stood, and the provocation under which he had acted, and beseeching them to help him. For she saw them standing, with all the rest of the orderly world, upon the side of the law—the law that Gilbert had broken—and the law, she had learned young in Crocker's Lane, was merciless and cruel. Against it one must help a comrade at all hazard, even as terrible a hazard as she dimly felt that she might run.

Quietly she went into the Bicknell kitchen, and put down her candles, and excused herself for the lateness of her coming. That evening she knit more diligently than usual, by the light of the great fire, which was all the light that the household enjoyed. With a fixed purpose she knit. When she laid down her work at last, her ball of yarn was all but spent.

Up in the slant-roofed chamber, she lay at Delia's side, and held herself quiet, and breathed deeply, as one who slept. Patiently she waited,

till by the stars that she could see through the narrow window, she judged the hour to be close on midnight. Then she crept softly from the bed, and, drawing on her petticoat, stole in her bare feet down the steep stair into the kitchen.

In the chamber off the kitchen slept the goodman and the goodwife, and Nicholas, in his truckle-bed, but the door to the chamber was shut. If she moved with reasonable care, Blithe felt herself to be safe. Without hesitation, as one who did what was already planned, she took from pegs on the wall, from the chest of drawers, and from the buttery, a heavy doublet of Goodman Bicknell's, a pair of new stockings, two cakes of unleavened, coarse bread, and a strip of dried goat's flesh.

These articles she meant for Gilbert's use, but so plainly were they meant for one who fled to the wood, so grossly, to her thinking, did they betray almost the name of the fugitive that she aided, that she added to them some trifles, such as a pilfering savage might pick up, namely, an old red hood, a tiny mirror of Delia's that hung on the wall, a horn spoon, and a pewter porringer.

Last of all she took down Seth's precious fowling-piece, with the bag of shot and the horn of powder that hung beside it. She had to do this, for Gilbert's sake, who with his boy's strength

could never have borne Goodman Bicknell's heavy piece on such a journey as he must take. But of all that she did that night this was the deed that she most loathed to do.

For greater convenience she slipped herself into the doublet, crammed the pockets full, and then, with the remainder of the plunder in her arms, stole forth by the kitchen door. In her bare feet she went noiselessly across the house-yard, and into the shadow of the outbuildings. Blessedly there was no moon to betray her, and the dogs, knowing her well and fondly, made no sound. Without disaster she reached the outermost shed, and from the darkness that to her accustomed eyes was now less dim, she saw Gilbert spring to meet her.

"Quickly!" she whispered. "Slip on the doublet. The pockets are filled. When thou art well away, do thou sort, and throw aside what thou needest not, but hide such goods fairly, lest thou be traced thereby. I may not bide. Seek not to thank me—" she checked his broken protests—"and God be wi' thee!"

Yet for a second the boy caught her hand.

"If ever I may requite—" he whispered.

She dared not linger. Already, now that she knew her task as good as done, she was afraid. Quickly she broke from him, and, noiseless as a

shadow, sped back to the house. Lightly stepping, she entered the kitchen, and, snatching up the knitting that she had laid ready, crept up the stair.

On tiptoe, with her breath held, she entered the slant-roofed chamber. For a blessed moment, she almost believed that luck had been with her, and that Delia had slept through everything. Then, dashing her hopes, she heard Delia's voice, acrid and accusing, speak from the bed.

"Wert not of such high birth," sneered Delia, "why, one might say thou camest creeping like a thief—ay, a thief in the night. Dare I to ask where haply thou hast been?"



CHAPTER XXI

IN SAYBURY STREET

BLITHE had her answer ready, as ready as the knitting that she held in her hand.

"I woke and could not sleep," she said. "So I was fain to knit, and stole below, and in questing for more yarn, I was longer than I had thought to be."

Delia sniffed, but she was silent, and presently, it seemed, fell asleep again. But Blithe, staring wide awake, sat by the window and plied the needles, that she did not need to see, until the sky was streaked with dawn.

With a feeling that she had been awake for years, and never was to sleep again, Blithe went down the stair, at the usual hour, neither earlier nor later, and took up her accustomed tasks. The kitchen was still dim with shadows. The lads were dull with sleep. No one had yet noticed anything amiss. But the moment of discovery would come—must come!

While Goodman Bicknell said the long grace over the bowl of stewed beans that was the morn-

ing meal, Seth's eyes must have gone ranging to the wall opposite his seat. Scarcely was the Amen uttered, when up he sprang.

"Who hath laid hand to my fowling-piece?" he cried. "Davie, I told thee if thou didst meddle—"

"Be silent!" rebuked his father.

"But my piece is gone from the wall," protested Seth, in a tragical voice.

"I never touched it," vowed David.

"Nor I," Jerad echoed.

"It hung there yesternight," said Goodwife Bicknell. She, too, had risen from her seat. "Hast taken thy doublet, goodman?" she asked her husband. "I see 'tis gone from behind the door."

Swiftly and surely she went the round of kitchen and of buttery, while her husband sat ominously silent, and the lads whispered together. In five minutes, careful housewife that she was, she knew every article that was missing, and had named them all fairly.

"Is't witches, mammy?" Nicholas, the youngest, whimpered, and clutched her gown.

"Too much method in madness for witches," Goodwife Bicknell answered gloomily. "Here hath been thievery, goodman, beyond a doubt."

"In this household there is but one who hath

come of thievish kind," Delia suggested, with her eyes upon the beans that she ate in dainty spoonfuls.

There was a moment of silence, in which Blithe counted the quick beats of her heart. Then Goodman Bicknell took up the word.

"It may be that pilferers from without have done this," he said, "though 'tis marvellous how they should know so surely what to seek and where, and the village till this hour hath been accounted honest. But the gear is gone. Of that there is no dispute. And hands must have helped it to go. Seth!" He turned to his eldest born. "Upon your conscience, know ye aught of this matter?"

"Upon my conscience, no, sir," the boy answered.

One by one Goodman Bicknell put the grave question to all his sons, even to little, frightened Nicholas, while Blithe felt herself grow hot and cold with the sure sense that soon the turn would come to her.

"Delia Sedgwick," the relentless voice went on, "know ye aught, upon your conscience?"

"Naught, I do protest," said Delia, "nor marked aught unusual in all the night, save that Blithe was long from her bed."

Blithe felt that all eyes were bent upon her.

"I fetched my knitting, for I could not sleep," she spoke, dry-lipped.

"And know ye aught of this matter?" Goodman Bicknell put to her the inexorable question. "On your conscience!"

For the space of a second Blithe met his eyes. In that second she remembered that she was not of thievish kind, as Delia had taunted her with being, but perhaps of the honest Mayhew blood.

"Yes," she said, though until that moment she had not dreamed that she was going to say it.

"Where is my fowling-piece?" Seth cried at once, and hotly.

With a gesture his father silenced him.

"Thou knowest who took these goods from my house?" he questioned sternly.

Blithe nodded.

"Thou thyself didst take them?"

She was silent.

"How was it? Come! Tell me the truth!" His voice was threatening.

Nicholas began to cry.

"I will tell you naught," said Blithe. She folded her hands on her lap, and fixed her eyes on the floor.

"I could not ha' believed it of the wench," sighed Goodwife Bicknell.

Blithe winced, but she kept silent.

"What didst thou with the goods?" persisted Goodman Bicknell.

"What could she, sooth?" said Goodwife Bicknell, like one bewildered.

"Trucked with them with the tawnies," Seth flung in, resentfully. "Only savages take mirrors and such like trumpery."

"Blithe is feared o' the savages," said Jerad.

"Or feigneth to be," amended Seth.

"It concerneth none but your father," Goodwife Bicknell interrupted. "Here's work enow, and one pair of hands the less this day to do it."

"Goodwife!" Blithe pleaded.

"I'll have no thievish hands upon my gear," the goodwife answered tartly. "To your tasks, boys! And thou, Delia, bestir thee and bear the milk to the calves. No words, mistress! Here's Blithe's work we must share this day between us, and thou, be sure, shalt have thy portion."

They all scattered to their various duties. Only Goodman Bicknell remained at the table with Blithe. For a mortal half hour their two wills wrestled, but she ended the victor, in so far that she kept silent. The goods were gone, and she knew where. As to that she would not, could not lie. But she could keep silent.

"Come with me, then, unto the stable!" Goodman Bicknell bade at last.

Blithe knew well enough what that meant. Girls as well as boys were smartly whipped, and often, by way of correction. Well, she had felt more than once the weight of Roaring Tim's hand, and she doubted if Goodman Bicknell's could be any heavier. She took her beating manfully. She did not weep, and neither did she speak.

In the end she found herself bolted into the tool-shed, with the admonition:

"Thou hast till noontime to bethink thyself. Then if thou wilt not confess all fairly, the constable shall come fetch thee."

All the long morning Blithe sat on the dusty floor of the tool-shed, among spades and hoes, shovels and crow-bars, while she waited, and wondered. A little she wondered what would in the end become of her, but even more she wondered by what miracle they had not guessed at once that she had helped a runaway servant, and had not learned already, by rumours from Doncaster, who that runaway was.

Only once was the tedium of the long hours broken. Then as she sat, half stupefied with useless thinking, she heard a guarded Hist! Looking up at the one narrow window, she saw Jerad's

face, where he clung, with elbows hooked upon the sill.

"Blithe!" he whispered. "Was't for G. M. thou hast done it?"

So nearly had the boy hit the truth that Blithe's heart stood still.

"Oh, do not thou tell!" she entreated him.

"'Twas vile o' thee to take Seth's piece," said Jerad, "but for a friend in need, 'tis different. Didst weep when Father lammed thee?"

"Nay," she answered. "Wherefore?"

"Catch!" bade he, and flung her down two ripe apples. "'Tis pity, Blithe, thou wert not a lad. Be sure I'll not tell."

He dropped from the sill, and she ate the apples, for the moment comforted.

At noon, just as he had promised, Goodman Bicknell came to the tool-shed. When he left Blithe, after a profitless ten minutes, he sent Watching to fetch the constable.

Of course Blithe knew the constable by sight, for she had often watched him in meeting time, or encountered him in Saybury Street. He was called Gideon Hubbard, and he was a broad, jovial man, such as she had never thought to be afraid of. But to meet him as a free maid was quite a different matter from meeting him as his

prisoner. She came quaking from her temporary jail.

"Come, come!" Hubbard bespoke her genially. "Here's no way for a wench to bear herself, that was accounted sober. Have done with thy naughtiness, make clean breast of all, and no doubt thy master will forgive thee."

Blithe shook her head.

"A stubborn spirit," said Goodman Bicknell. "Let the law now deal with her."

He went away into the house, and Blithe, at the constable's side, footed it along the familiar path to Saybury Street, which seemed now as unfamiliar as in a weary dream.

"Thou seest, wench," the constable urged her, kindly enough, "or haply thou seest not, being so short a time in the plantation, 'tis a serious matter to convoy guns and powder into the hands of the savages, ay, and the law is strict on that point. Bethink thee and speak while yet there is time."

Blithe shook her head. She felt that if she spoke, she might burst out weeping.

"Well, have thy way!" bade the constable, in not unnatural exasperation.

By this time they had reached the village street. Already some rumour of the mischance at

Bicknell's must have travelled thither. Boys and girls left their tasks, and followed at their heels. Women came to their doorways, and, shading their eyes against the sunlight, gazed after them. Speedily people were not only staring, but pointing, and shouting, and calling one to another.

"Bicknell's Blithe is taken for a thief!" the words were flung from mouth to mouth, and smote upon Blithe's ears. A thief—and this would prove to all the world that she was come of thievish kin! For a moment she almost felt herself that it must be true. She walked in the constable's charge, with her head downbent, and her cheeks aflame.

Then above the murmurs of the little crowd that tagged at her heels, Blithe heard a child's voice cry shrilly:

"Bly! Here cometh my Bly!"

She looked up, praying that she had not really recognised the little voice that she had never forgotten. There, before the door of the alehouse, she saw an ox-wain halted. Seated upon it she beheld, of all the world, Mistress Winwood, with Kitt on her lap, and she saw the eyes, as of one stabbed to the heart, that Mistress Winwood fixed upon her.

CHAPTER XXII

TURN OF THE PATH

AT the constable's house, Blithe was led up the stair to a rear chamber, with a sloping roof, and there the door was made fast upon her. In the chamber were a four-legged stool, and a pallet, with an old rug for a covering. She threw herself upon the pallet, and lay with her face hidden. But still she seemed to see the reproach in Mistress Winwood's eyes that sought her in the jeering crowd, and the disappointment in Kitt's little face, as she held her baby arms outstretched to her Bly in vain.

When the shadows began to fall, Goodwife Hubbard came to the chamber, with a jug of water and a half loaf of coarse bread.

"I'm sorry indeed to see thee here, Blithe," said she. "By morn I trust thou'lt be of better mind. 'Tis no jesting matter, maidie, thou to be taken afore the court, and so I warn thee fairly."

After the kind woman had gone, Blithe crept

to the stool, where the bread and water were set. She drank a long draught, but she could not eat a morsel. Again she threw herself upon the pallet, and to her surprise slept heavily, the sleep of utter weariness of body and of spirit.

She woke in broad daylight, and at first wondered where she lay, but speedily, and to her sorrow, she had remembered. She was a prisoner in the constable's house, under the incredible charge of robbing her master, in order to hold traffic with the savages, and Mistress Winwood, come at this time of all times, had seen and knew of her open disgrace. After that, she felt that no pain they could inflict upon her would greatly matter.

The hours of the autumn day dragged slowly by. Goodwife Hubbard brought her a generous bowl of porridge for her breakfast, and once again besought her to confess. Presently the constable came and urged her in like manner. At noontime Elder Torrey, the minister, visited her, and for an hour wrought with her in prayer.

Later in her life Blithe realised that all this was done in kindness, by good folk, though stern, who honestly were loath to give even a little stranger girl to be punished by the court. At the time, however, she thought of them only as enemies, who desired but to torture her with their questions and urgings, and every hour she grew the

more sullen and stubborn. She would tell them naught, never, never, for nothing they could do, she repeated to herself.

She had the comfort to sustain her that by her silence she gained the end that she desired. That she had taken the goods in order to aid Gilbert, seemed not to be suspected. She could only wonder how it was that no tidings of his flight had come from Doncaster, to set the Saybury folk upon the trail of the truth. Two nights and a day, and half another day he now had had in which to make good his escape. At least she could give thanks that he was safe, and her sacrifice not made in vain.

In the little chamber there was one window, small and narrow, but unbarred, that looked upon the field at the west side of the constable's house, and a path that meandered toward the forest. Blithe told herself that, if she wished to do so, she might escape from prison by that window. She had ventured more dangerous scrambling in Crocker's Lane.

But if she escaped, where should she go? She was no lad, to fend for herself in the wood, and even if she had been, she doubted if she should have had the courage to cast herself upon the mercy of the savages that she so feared. Among the white people she felt, in her bitter-

ness, that she had no friends left. Did she not remember the horror and dismay in Mistress Winwood's face?

The moments dragged heavily in the close little chamber. Blithe plucked straws from her pallet and plaited them, and wove them into a rude little basket. Such a toy would have pleased Kitt, she sadly thought. Then she heard the bolt of her door withdrawn, and there on the threshold, with sad eyes, stood Kitt's mother.

"Blithe!" said Mistress Winwood, and held out her hands. "Thou poor child!"

Blithe sprang up from the stool, and backed against the wall, with clasped hands tightly strained against her breast. She must tell naught, for nothing they could do, she wildly told herself.

"Thou couldst not have done this thing," Mistress Winwood spoke on. "Some villain did constrain thee or deceive thee. Was't not McBride? O Blithe, confess all fairly!"

Blithe stood, dumb as a stone.

"I have won leave to speak with thee," Mistress Winwood's voice besought her. "I still shall stand thy friend, but thou must speak. This hard, unyielding spirit will destroy thee. Come, Blithe! Wilt thou not trust me?"

But Gilbert's secret was not Blithe's own secret

that she could yield for the asking. Even to Mistress Winwood's pleading, Blithe shook a stubborn head, and at last, after an hour that had racked them both, an hour of entreaties and expostulations, of prayers and even promises, Mistress Winwood, like the others, had to give over.

"Heaven pity thee, Blithe!" she said, with tears in her eyes. "There is nothing now that I can do to help thee."

Sorrowfully she went out of the room, and bolted the door behind her.

Blithe had not spoken a word. If she once had opened her lips, she knew that she should have babbled everything. How could she refuse anything to Mistress Winwood? But she had refused, for Gilbert's sake, and now she knew herself utterly outcast from her dear lady's grace.

She stumbled to her comfortless pallet, and there, poor little image of stubborn insensibility that she had seemed, even to the eyes of love, she wept stormily till she was spent and sick. But when she heard Goodwife Hubbard come to fetch her supper, she turned her tear-swollen face to the wall, and pretended to be asleep.

That night Blithe's rest was broken, and full of dreams. In the morning she begged Goodwife Hubbard to let her have some knitting, and the goodwife, eager to profit by such willing aid,

said nothing to her husband, but fetched yarn and needles. Through the long morning Blithe made herself count stitches and forbore to think of all that might not be amended.

At eleven of the clock the goodwife fetched the broth of pease that should be Blithe's dinner.

"Wellawell!" said she. "A naughty maid thou art, and little deservest the good friends that have sought to help thee. Here's fine tidings that should make thee proud, which my lass Tamsine had of Bicknell's David, when he came to fetch nails this morn from the smith's. Is not that good lady, Mistress Winwood, taken to her bed this day, fair made ill with thy perversity? Take shame to thyself and amend thy ways!"

So saying, Goodwife Hubbard left the room, and Blithe salted the broth with her tears. Not once in her three days of captivity had she felt so completely downbeaten. She let the knitting slide to the floor, and leaning her head against the casement, looked wearily out upon the field and the path that led to the forest. As she looked, she grew aware of two figures that strayed along the path. The one was a tall maid, with a basket on her arm, the other a little child, who ran before her, and in the autumn sunlight the little one's bobbing curls gleamed ruddy.

Instantly Blithe had recognised the two. It

was Delia Sedgwick who walked yonder and, to judge by the basket on her arm, she was going to the bramble patch in the wood, where late blackberries were to be found. The child that frolicked before Delia, left to Delia's careless tending in her mother's illness, was Kitt.

"O my baby!" Blithe murmured, as with her eyes she followed the little, dancing figure. "Oh, I must once bespeak thee. I cannot bear it else, and thou so near."

That she might draw further punishment on herself meant nothing. Swift almost as thought, she was wriggling through the narrow window. Lucky indeed it was that she was as slim and lithe as a boy. For an instant she hung by her hands, then, with a murmured prayer, she dropped the distance of the low story to the ground.

Fortunately the distance was not great. Although she was shaken by the fall, more than she had bargained for, Blithe found herself unhurt. At her best speed, but with a wary eye to take advantage of every shelter that tree or bush or pile of rocks afforded her, she scudded toward the forest.

By the time that Blithe had reached the outermost trees, Delia and Kitt had vanished among the shadows, but their path was clear to follow. A little breathless, Blithe slackened her speed, as

she walked along. Then, to her amazement, in the gloom and the quiet of the forest, she seemed to waken from the fever of the days that were past.

Had she done well, she wondered, in blindly pushing aside every hand that had been held out to help her? Was it not possible, even now, for her to go with Kitt to the Bicknell farm, and there, quite humbly and simply, tell Mistress Winwood the whole truth, and beg her forgiveness? Even though they punished her, as surely they would, she never doubted, Mistress Winwood at least would know that she was not ungrateful, nor had she done as she had done out of sheer wantonness.

Comforted and even hopeful, as she made this plan, Blithe quickened her pace. Soon, she told herself, she should clasp Kitt once again in her arms. She was sorry that she had not thought to bring with her the little plaited basket, to fill with berries for the child's delight.

Then suddenly she heard on the path before her the beat of frightened footsteps, louder and louder, and the crackle of branches that were dashed aside. Round a turn in the path Delia burst upon her, wild-eyed, with outflung hands, and dry lips, gasping with unspoken terror, and Delia was alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO THE RESCUE!

FRANTICALLY through Blithe's mind rushed the thought:

"On the path to the berry-patch there are neither pools nor bog-holes. Black bears are harmless creatures. Wolves are savage only in winter."

Putting aside all known and possible perils, she faced the horror of the unknown. Even while she realised what she had to face, she leaped and fronted Delia in the path.

"Where's Kitt?" she challenged.

Delia beat the air with her palms, but she halted, frightened almost as much by Blithe's pale fury as by the terror that pursued her.

"The tawny-skins!" she gasped. "Savages! They sprang from the wood. They fired upon me as I fled."

"And thou didst leave Kitt?" Blithe whispered.

She would not have wasted time in striking

Delia, if she had not found Delia blocking her path. Such being the case, she flew at the tall girl, and struck her, hard-fisted, such a blow as a boy might have dealt.

"Thou vilest thing!" she panted, as she struck.

Then, without wasting a glance upon the wretched girl, Blithe ran headlong down the path into the depth of the wood. She had forgotten that she feared the savages, even as she feared demons from the pit, or rather, remembering, she sensed that, great as was her terror of them, ten times greater would be the terror of the poor little child, whom Delia had abandoned. She must reach Kitt, and if she could not save her, at least die with her.

On ran Blithe, crashing aside the bushes, tearing through the bramble patch. On she ran blindly into the thickest woods beyond. She had not dreamed the sound that drew her. Surely she had heard a child's wail of terror that was quickly stifled.

"Kitt!" she shrilled. "Bly cometh to thee."

Far before her, among the trees, she spied for a moment the bronze of a bare shoulder, and the gleam of a child's ruddy curls. She never knew how she broke through the low-growing branches that slatted her face, and leaped across the crabbed roots of primeval trees. But she was up with

them, five Indian fellows, trudging in single file, and one of them bore Kitt in his arms.

Across his shoulder Blithe saw the tear-stained little face. She darted past the intervening savages, though she sensed that one of them struck at her. A veritable little tiger-cat, biting, clawing, kicking, she flung herself upon the man that held Kitt.

"My baby!" she screamed, with imprecations learned in Crocker's Lane. "Thou foul, cogging varlet! I'll tear thine heart out. I'll scratch thee blind. Give me back my baby! My baby! My baby!"

She was hurled aside, but ere she touched the ground, she was up and at him again. She did not cease to scream and strike, until she was plucked back by merciless hands. She stood gasping, too breathless even to berate the man, while every moment she expected to be killed, and did not care at all.

It was weeks indeed before Blithe learned the reason why she was not, as she had expected, instantly knocked upon the head. Then, as she came to know more of Indian words and ways, she realised that the tall savage who had seized her, Wequash by name, had, by a happy chance, approved of her, as his gutturals informed his fellows, for a brave little squaw. Wequash was the

son of the chief of these poor remnants of a once strong tribe, and a brave warrior, whose word had weight with his comrades.

Moreover the Indians liked a joke, and they were amused to witness the discomfiture of the young man who bore Kitt, a notorious boaster, as it happened, at the hands of a squaw. Because they were amused at his plight, they were ready to look on his assailant with lenience.

So, to her amazement, Blithe found that neither she nor Kitt was harmed. Another savage, tempting fate, as perhaps he may have thought, lifted the child in his arms. Wequash released Blithe, with a grunt or so, which she interpreted as a warning to behave herself. Then off they set again, in single file.

Unconstrained though she was, Blithe kilted up her petticoat, and went with the savages. If they carried Kitt clear to the end of the earth, she meant to go with them. She never doubted but she could keep up with them. For any ordinary need she was strong enough, she knew, and for any extraordinary need she assumed that God would send her the strength.

Over roots and fallen logs, through brooks, through brambles, up hill and down, she trudged at the heels of the man who carried Kitt. All the

while she smiled upon the little one's troubled face, and as often as she had the breath to spare, babbled for her comfort:

"Kind tawnies! Pretty tawnies! Be not frightened, sweetheart. The gentle tawnies would not hurt little Kitt!"

To be sure, Blithe did not in the least believe what she said, but even if the child was to die a cruel death, why let her die twice over with the fear of it?

For an hour or more the little band trudged briskly through the wood. Long since a delicately nurtured maid would have given out. Even Blithe, who was no sheltered flower, felt her breath come short. Then happily they rested for a time by the side of a spring, where little Kitt was suffered to cling to Blithe.

Before they took up the march again, they were joined by two other savages, who brought with them a newly slaughtered fawn. As a matter of course, they gave the carcass to Blithe to carry. Ten paces she walked with the burden, then, seeing that, thus laden, she could not keep up with Kitt, she threw it into the bushes. Kitt, and only Kitt! It was wonderful how the thought of the child had driven away all Blithe's former terror of the savages, and forever!

Wequash picked up the carcass, and, with words that seemed threats, pressed it again upon Blithe.

"Go to! Go to!" she scolded him. "I cannot be so vexed, I tell 'ee."

She flung the burden away from her, and at sight of his uplifted fist, laughed in his face.

Wequash did not strike her. Days later she was to realise that he and all his mates believed her, from her preposterous behaviour, to be not merely a brave squaw, but of great rank and consideration among her own people. One of the savages took up the load that she had rejected, and the march went on. Kitt, much reassured, began to pat the cheek of the savage who bore her, and he did not seem to resent the attention.

On they marched, through shadows that deepened and grew dense. On and relentlessly on. Blithe began to feel that it was by her will alone, not by any strength left in her, that she made her tired feet keep up the terrible pace.

At last they halted for the night by a little running brook. Swiftly a fire was kindled and strips of meat were set to broil. Kitt nestled unhindered at Blithe's side, and in her soft, small voice questioned of this and that. When the meat was broiled, a fair portion was given to Blithe, which she cooled and plucked in fragments

and shared with the child. Then, as no one forbade her, she went a short way into the wood, calling softly to Kitt meantime not to be afraid, and broke branches of fir, which she heaped in a little pile to make a bed.

It was clear enough, even to dull wits, and the wits of the tawnies were not altogether dull, that Blithe could not escape, carrying the heavy child with her through the untracked forest, and it was equally clear that she would never go and leave the child behind. So for the night she was left untrammelled and unbound, to her own guidance. Thankful for that mercy, she lay down on the rude bed, in the midst of her captors, and hugged Kitt close in her arms. Oh, how would she have fared, this little, helpless innocent, if Blithe had not been there, by Heaven's mercy, to guard her in the perils of the forest!

"My baby! Mine own precious baby!" crooned Blithe. "Be not afeared for aught while Bly is near."

Overhead she saw the cold autumn stars keep watch. Round her she heard the half-guessed rustlings of creatures of the forest that were alert with the fall of night.

"What's that?" whispered Kitt, crowding closer. "O Bly! What's yon?"

"Naught, naught," Blithe whispered. "Only

the good beasts that go about their business."

Then in that darksome forest there came to her remembrance words of Kitt's mother, that had comforted her months before. In that place of peril she whispered them, to soothe the child that she protected:

"Sleep, pretty babe, and cease to weep.

The good God guard thee in thy sleep."

And soothing Kitt, Blithe soothed herself, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FIRST SNOWFALL.

YEARS afterward, when Blithe was an old woman, and told the story to her wondering grandchildren, she was able to see where there were beginning and end, not to mention high places and turning points, in her life among the savages. But at the time she merely lived from hour to hour, almost from moment to moment, and never knew what the next moment might bring.

At first she had some hope of rescue. She told herself that perhaps, if Delia Sedgwick had run straight to the village, and if the men had armed and started hot-foot on the trail, she and Kitt might in short while see their friends again. But for three days the Indians travelled west and north, and with every mile Blithe saw her hope grow less, until she lost it utterly.

Then she cheered herself with another comfort. After all, she had not found the Indians cruel. Perhaps they intended to hold her and Kitt for ransom. Perhaps they would them-

selves send to the whites, roundabout, word of the capture, and tell where the captives might be found and redeemed. Before the first snowfall surely Master Mayhew would come to seek his little grandchild. Oh, yes, she trusted still that all would yet be well!

The Indians who led them captive, she gathered, were a hunting party of the Pawtuckets, a once powerful tribe that with illness and with wars among themselves had sadly dwindled. They were very different indeed from the dreaded Mohawks and the Iroquois, who dwelt beyond the Connecticut River. If Blithe and Kitt had fallen into such hands, their story might well have been sadly altered. These Pawtuckets were, according to Blithe's notions, lazy and unclean, but in their way they were goodnatured fellows.

Indeed Blithe came to feel, with mounting anger, that if Delia, on the day of the seizure, had shown only the courage of a mouse, if she had fronted the savages calmly, in the surety that she had men to back her, close by in Saybury village, both she and the child might have escaped unscathed. But when Delia had screamed and fled, the savages had of course grown bold, and one of them, in the wanton sportiveness of an overgrown boy, had shot an arrow after her.

Apparently, then, the Indians had been fright-

ened at their own deed, for the New England savages, with the exception perhaps of the Pequots, to southward, had never inclined to murder. They had turned and fled into the forest, even while Delia was fleeing to the settlement, but in their flight, on mere impulse, it seemed, they had snatched up the child that Delia had forsaken.

With her blood chilled at the thought, Blithe realised that on second impulse they might easily have knocked Kitt on the head, or, more horrible, abandoned her in the forest, with just as little conscience as small boys show in abandoning a troublesome kitten.

But with Blithe at hand, the case was altered. Not only did Wequash approve of Blithe, but the child, under her care, was never troublesome, but prettily friends with all the savages. With her fair skin and bright curls, such as most of the band had never seen, she awakened perhaps a kind of superstitious reverence in those strange hearts. At any rate, Blithe and Kitt travelled with the Indians, not only unmolested, but well fed and assisted.

For three days they travelled through the forest, by trails that were visible only to the sharp eyes of the Indians. They lived on the game that the men killed with their arrows.

They drank of the running springs. They slept coldly by sheltered camp-fires, under the clear autumn stars.

On the fourth day they came to the bank of a considerable river, which the Indians called in their language Merrimac. Here they launched the canoes that they had left hidden in the bushes, and by devious branches of the stream, with now and then a portage, came on the fifth day to their native village.

Blithe had heard enough tales from the Pequot War about the tortures inflicted on prisoners, to live the next hour in a terror that was sickening, although she bravely hid it. But she and Kitt suffered no ill usage. Squaws and children flocked round them, full of wonder, while dogs barked their hostility from a safe distance. The squaws stroked Blithe's garments and touched Kitt's ruddy curls. Some of the very little children hid themselves for fear of the first white faces that ever they had seen. Wandering Englishmen now and then had consorted with men of the village in their hunting parties, but they had been bronzed almost as the savages themselves. Never had there been seen in those parts a young white girl, or a white child.

Presently a squaw ventured to take Kitt in her arms. To Blithe's relief, for she guessed that

much depended at that moment on the child's behaviour, Kitt showed no fear. Why should she? For five days she had constantly been told that the tawnies were gentle creatures. Babbling to the squaw, Kitt began to examine the beads about her neck, and to stroke her well-greased, coarse black hair.

In the end the squaw carried the child away to her lodge, with Blithe resolutely following. The squaw was wife of Wequash, and had but lately lost her own wee girl. Inside the hour she had Kitt tricked out in moccasins and beads, to the child's huge delight, and hailed her as her daughter. Blithe, too, had a place in the lodge, half as attendant on the child, half as a species of honoured guest.

A few words of English, it appeared, were known to Wequash, though he never spoke in that tongue. One of the older men, however, had a scant knowledge of the language of the whites, and he asked Blithe, quite respectfully, if she could not teach her Indian brothers how to make gunpowder. When she assured him that she could not, he and his fellows were disappointed, but not resentful.

The village of the Pawtuckets consisted of a score or so of lodges, each one sheltering several families, which were grouped along a sort of

street. The lodges were built with a framework of bent willows, on which were laid mats of woven grass. Through a hole in the roof some, but not all, of the smoke from the fire escaped.

At first Blithe and Kitt sneezed and choked miserably in the heavy and acrid air of the lodge, but soon they grew used to it. They grew used, also, to sitting on mats and sleeping under skins of wild beasts. Moreover, with an ease that was quite shocking, they grew used to eating with their fingers from the common kettle in which the pottage was cooked.

Round the lodges were the fields that the squaws had tended, while the warriors went hunting and fishing. Here ripened orange-hued pumpkins and golden squashes, and hills of Indian corn. Round the fields, in turn, was the forest, with trees of nuts and windfalls of acorns, waiting to be garnered, against the bleak and hungry days of winter.

You may be sure that Blithe was not idle, in those golden days of Indian Summer. Ungrudgingly she helped the squaws gather their harvest from field and forest. She ground corn between two stones for Kitt's adopted mother. She learned from an old woman, the mother of We-quash, how to weave baskets. Sometimes, too, she ran races with the Indian girls of her own

age, or splashed with them in the stream below the village, while they all shrieked and shouted, as Blithe had never dared to shout in Puritan Saybury.

Often in these days she told herself hopefully:

"When they come to seek us, when I reach Boston with Kitt—and without Kitt I never will come thither!—perhaps I shall be forgiven my fault in taking the gear, for the sake of the service I have done the child, though 'twas ne'er for that I did it! And perhaps, too, when I shall once come thither, are letters brought from England that shall say truly I be kin to Kitt and to Mistress Winwood, who once more will love me, and all will then be well."

Cheerily, then, with work and with play, she lived through the bronze and flame of Indian Summer. Hopefully still, though now with hope a little fevered, she wore through the chill and grey November weather that followed.

"Before the first snowfall they'll come," she kept repeating, while she coughed in the air of the lodge that grew more bitter as the fire was heaped higher for warmth and still higher.

Then one morning when Blithe woke, with one side well roasted, where she had turned toward the fire, and the other side half frozen, she heard a curious hiss and sputter, as if drops of water

were falling on the flames. Down the smoke-hole something swirled, in what she would not admit to be flakes. She ran to put aside, by the width of a crack, the mat that screened the doorway, and Kitt came at her side.

"Oh, pretty! Pretty!" cried Kitt, and clapped her hands.

They could only half see the forest, for the veil that pulsed between them and the trees, and the veil was of white flakes, that came drifting like angel feathers through the laden air. The first snow was falling.

Blithe let the mat drop into place, and sat down by the fire. Until that moment she had not realised how superstitiously she had pinned her faith to the coming of rescue before the first snow-fall. Now she felt that she was doomed to spend the winter among the Indians, and all the winters of her life to follow.

"For unhelped we cannot escape," she thought, "until Kitt be of an age to travel on her own feet. And by that time Kitt may herself be half a savage, and I be given in marriage to some tawny warrior. Oh, a strange end that would be for a lass out of Crocker's Lane, nay, haply a lass of Mayhew blood, and gently born!"

All the morning Blithe brooded by the fire, in the midst of the chattering squaws and children

that were her mates. Outside the lodge she knew that the snow was falling, and she seemed to feel each flake a chill thrust at her heart. Then while she brooded, in came bursting one of the Indian girls, with whom she had often played.

"¹ Wompey!" cried the girl, as one who bore great news, and for Blithe's understanding she added her two words of English, "Coat men! Coat men!"

Blithe sprang to her feet.

"When? Where? Tell me! Tell me!" she cried wildly.

Over her shoulder the girl pointed, and, waiting for no more, Blithe ran out into the snow. Too good for belief, she beheld two figures hastening along the street toward Wequash's lodge, clad both of them in Indian dress, moccasins, long leggins, and shirts of deerskin, but with faces that, for all their coat of tan, were English faces.

Headlong Blithe ran toward them. She was in their arms, so fleetly had she sped, so fleetly had they come to meet her, before she had found breath to cry aloud the names that instantly she had known.

"O Gilbert! O my cousin Gerritt! Oh, is it ye at last, of all the world? I ha' so prayed and waited. O lads, but God is good!"

¹ White.

CHAPTER XXV

NIGHTFALL

IF ever Blithe had cherished hard thoughts of Gerritt, who might years earlier have told her about her gentle kin; if ever she had harboured resentful thoughts of Gilbert, who had left her to pay alone the price of his escape, she forgot such thoughts now. Dearest of all living creatures she saw them, and they her, in the joy of this strange reunion in the snowy forest.

Gerritt, first of the three, as became his greater age and experience, recovered a taciturnity that sat oddly upon him.

"So thou art the white captive of whom we heard a rumour eastward," said he. "All in good time we'll have thy tale. But for now, we must stand on civility with the tawny gentry."

Together they entered the lodge, where for an interminable time, as it seemed to Blithe, Gerritt smoked a pipe with Wequash, whom, it appeared, he had known of old. Only after food had been cooked and eaten, was it possible for Gerritt and Gilbert to seat themselves near Blithe

and Kitt. Then, secure in the knowledge that their words were to all purposes unintelligible to those about them, they talked freely.

Blithe first of all, in response to Gerritt's bidding, poured forth her story. She was surprised to find how few words went to the telling of two months' adventures.

"Your fortunes, now!" she bade. "Thou first, Gerritt! I heard that thou hadst fled southward."

"Then shouldst thou have known me well enow to seek me northward," he smiled. "Yea, truly, in my flight, after I had lammed my good master, Barefoot, I journeyed six hours southward, and pained myself to ask aid of divers charitable folk, who, I made sure, would straightway lay information against me, and set the worshipful Law thus on the wrong track. But under cover of night I doubled on my trail, and so to friends of mine, lads o' life, in Weymouth village, and one an old shipmate on the *Rainbow* pinnace. By their connivance I was stowed aboard a shallop bound for Monhegan, where I joined me to a roving band of Tarentines, known to me aforetime, and later I came to the Pawtucketts, with whom I look to winter. For with my gun and such poor skill as I may boast therewith, I am ever welcome 'mongst my Indian brothers."

Truth, it was pretty to see how the prigger of prancers plumed himself as he said the words! Blithe felt that he had only to snap his fingers, and she should find herself and Kitt not merely released, but borne in state to their waiting friends.

"Oh, rarely all hath happened," said she. "But what of thee, Gilbert?"

"Any fortune were good, after Joel Diffy," he answered. "The tawnies received me kindly, but for fear of wandering Mohawks I durst not journey westward, as I had planned. Instead I strayed northward, and then east, and in course of weeks chanced to meet with Gerritt once again, and like him am I minded now to end my days 'mongst the tawnies."

"Oh!" cried Blithe, and her face fell. "But so am not I. O Gerritt! Canst thou not—"

"Peace!" Gerritt bade sharply. With his eyes he held hers. "Wise head keepeth silent tongue," said he. "Well can I guess whither thou wouldst, thou and the child. With a maid 'tis different, ay, than with us that are men."

"Kitt must to her kindred," murmured Blithe. "And for myself—O Gerritt! With the coming of the ships, what good fortune may not wait me now in Boston town!"

Gerritt's sharp eyes softened.

"True!" said he. "I will do for thee always the best I can do, my little coz. Leave all to me!"

"Surely," Blithe answered. "I trust thee. And all will now be well."

Blithe never wavered in her faith through the days that followed. She never dreamed with what patience and what tact Gerritt McBride brought to bear on the Indians every tittle of weight that his influence possessed, how he argued and bribed, promised, cajoled, even remotely threatened the displeasure of the white men. She knew only the results that he achieved, and those results she simply had expected.

Gerritt came to her at last on a day in late November—a mild day, in which the remnant of that first snowfall dwindled almost to nothing.

"All's in order," said Gerritt. "I have made them hark to reason, though sorely, for his squaw's sake, Wequash grudgeth to lose the child. Now have we leave to bring thee and little Kitt to the whites on Piscataquay. Wequash and two of his young men go with us, and I have sworn to him he shall have in exchange for you two a gun, such as the white men use, and store of powder and ball, two good hatchets, a beaver hat, and a petticoat of red stammel for his squaw. The folk at the settlement surely will furnish the gear, and

his sour-visaged worshipfulness on Windmill Hill may requite them. And if he be man at all," Gerritt added, "he will also requite it to thee, Blithe, for love of whom, and only for that love, I pain myself to do this thing."

"He hath been ever kind to me," said Blithe.

"Haply he will be kinder," Gerritt took her up. "Hast fairly the tale of thy birth, as I sent it thee by Gilbert?"

"Ay," said she.

"'Tis true tale," said Gerritt, "and that will I maintain, but thou seest, I may not back to Boston to maintain it, for fear of Lambert Barefoot."

"Why, surely not," Blithe granted readily.

Gerritt McBride was not one to let the iron cool, while in the process of striking. The very next day, to profit by the fair weather and the fair mood of his fickle hosts, he set out on the journey eastward, with his little band that consisted of Wequash, and his two braves, Gilbert, and Blithe, and Kitt. A small mob of squaws and children followed the travellers for a little distance, but Wequash's squaw stayed behind in her lodge, with her mantle over her head, while Kitt, in Gerritt's arms, wept aloud for her tawny foster-mother.

They made a long stage that day, and camped snugly for the night. The next day, too, was

uneventful. With a foreboding that she knew was silly, Blithe feared in her heart that Heaven was too kind.

On the third day, as they rested for a little space at noontime, Gerritt drew Blithe aside.

"A word wi' thee, coz," he said, and made her sit on a fallen tree beside him. "Tell me," he began, "have thy words weight with Gilbert yonder?"

He pointed to where the boy, tanned as a young savage, and with a manliness and assurance about him that were new, sat stringing a bow, under the instruction of Wequash.

"I know not," Blithe answered, troubled.

"He should listen to thee," said Gerritt. "Thou hast done much for him, and at great cost to thyself. Now if he will listen, Blithe, for his own sake, and for that I have come to love the lad, pray him return with thee to Boston."

"And the whipping post?" Blithe questioned evenly.

"I doubt that," Gerritt answered. "For thou canst say true that he hath stood thy friend in the forest, and the child's friend. But even were't to the whipping post, better he should back to the white men."

"Yet for thyself," she said, "thou wilt have it otherwise."

For once Gerritt's smile was not altogether merry.

"Little coz," said he, "I am grown old before my time in many things. There is no room for childhood in Crocker's Lane. I am a thief, and the son of a thief. But Gilbert, thou seest, is sprung of other blood, and lessoned in other ways. I gain somewhat, going with the tawnies. He loseth all. Bid him back with thee, Blithe! 'Tis a good deed thou'lt do."

Something in the earnestness of the face that he wore, unlike his usual careless semblance, touched Blithe deeply.

"A good deed thou doest also, Gerritt," she said, "urging me to urge him."

"Thinkest thou so?" he answered. "Nay, good deeds and I are strangers. Come! 'Tis time we should march, for the dark cometh early."

Blithe made the march that afternoon, like one lost in thought. Partly she puzzled over the words that she must speak to Gilbert. Partly she wondered at the seriousness that she had noticed in Gerritt. Did he, too, feel, she asked herself, that Heaven was too kind?

Toward nightfall they breasted some high land,

and found themselves clambering over ledges of granite, that upbore a serried growth of pine trees. They were marching later than they usually marched, and at greater speed, with less caution. Doubtless they were pressing forward to some good camping place that was known to the Indians.

Blithe caught her poor, tattered petticoat on a branch, and lingered for a moment to free it. Then, as she hurried to rejoin her comrades, who already were swallowed in the shadows of the pines, she realised that confusion had fallen upon them. She heard no outcries, for to make outcry was not the custom of the savages, but she heard faintly a noise of crashing branches and of falling stones.

With her heart in her throat, Blithe ran forward, between branches that still wavered where her mates had passed. She checked herself only just in time. Almost at her feet opened a wide cleft between the granite ledges—a cleft so wide that it was a chasm. The tops of the tall beeches that grew in its depth were level with the dwarf pines that surrounded her.

Perilously near the edge sat Kitt, with her face all puckered, ready to cry. Blithe snatched her up and soothed her, while she listened agonisedly

for some sound that should tell her what had happened. She heard only the dash of water in the black depth of the chasm.

Was this but another of the many strange incidents that had marked her weeks among the savages—incidents that so often had proved explicable and even commonplace? Or did it this time spell disaster? Wondering, Blithe waited, while the shadows grew every moment denser. Then she heard a snapping of twigs, and beheld Gilbert, who came swinging himself over the edge of the chasm. As he drew near her, she saw that his face was pallid beneath the sunburn.

"Gerritt?" she questioned.

She knew all at once that her worst foreboding was to be realised, even before the boy nodded:

"Yes."

CHAPTER XXVI

FORSAKEN

WHETHER Gerritt had slipped on a treacherous film of ice, as he strode carelessly, or whether he had fallen with a shelving rock, displaced, would never be surely known, nor did it greatly matter. Enough that he had fallen, and for every sake there must not be a repetition of the disaster.

Slowly and cautiously, testing every foot-hold and hand-hold, Gilbert and Blithe picked their way down the side of the gorge. They were the more cautious, because they bore Kitt with them. From one to the other they passed her, on the descent that seemed endless. Meanwhile Kitt, who thought it all a game, laughed merrily. Shrill echoes of her childish laughter were given back by the rocks, but otherwise in the gorge was a deathly stillness.

The shadows had darkened into night, so long a time the cautious descent had taken. Through the darkness Blithe peered, with growing anxiety.

"Why have they not kindled a fire?" she asked.

"Soon we shall know," Gilbert answered shortly. "Take heed to that rock! 'Tis loosed, and will not bear thy weight."

Slipping and scrambling over a heap of rubble, at last they gained the bottom of the chasm. High above their heads, they could see a slit of sky, less black than the walls of rock that towered round them. Nearer at hand, in the dark, a brook growled like a savage animal in leash.

"Listen!" bade Gilbert. He touched Blithe's hand with a hand that was chill.

Blithe strained her ears, but she heard no sound of crackling branches, or of wary footfalls, such as she had heard every night when the camp was made. Only in the dark she heard the moans of a man in dire pain.

She had it on her tongue to ask:

"Have the tawnies fled?"

But she bit back the question. If Gilbert should answer yes, how could she bear it? Not in this hour, with Gerritt stricken, and it might be dying. Later, perhaps, she could better face calamity.

"We must have a fire," she said simply.

"Ay," Gilbert answered.

Like herself, he chose not to put foreboding into words.

Swiftly and in silence those two young things

set their hands to what was next to do. In a few minutes they had Kitt lapped warmly in the deerskin mantle that Blithe cast off, and safely snuggled against a dead stump, near the spot where Gerritt moaned. Then they fetched dry branches, and a treasure of drifted leaves, on which Blithe stumbled. At last they had enough fuel, and Blithe made then a screen with her petticoat against stray blasts, while Gilbert patiently struck steel on flint, till he sent a spark among the dead leaves.

Quickly the tiny flame spread and broadened. Fingers of light presently clutched and unclutched the darkness of the chasm. Kitt clapped her hands for pleasure to watch them, but Gilbert and Blithe looked at each other, with faces of despair. For under the light that mocked them with its pranks, they saw Gerritt McBride, with his face the hue of clay, stretched on the hard ground, untended, just as he had been lifted from the rocks on which he had dashed in his fall, and in the chasm they saw no other living creature.

"They have gone," Blithe put into words the fear that had been hers for the last half hour.

She was amazed to hear how quietly she spoke.

"They have taken with them all the packs," Gilbert confirmed her, in the same voice of deadly quiet. "Thereto Gerritt's piece is missing."

"Where's thine?" she questioned swiftly. Life or death, she knew, might hang on the answer.

"I left it halfway down the gorge," he told her. "It hindered, with the child to help. I'll fetch it straight."

"Best so," she nodded.

In a second Gilbert was swallowed up in the shadows. Like one dazed, Blithe stood staring at the fire. For the moment she heeded neither the injured man, who groaned, nor the tired child, who began to whimper for food. She needed all her wits to grasp the calamity that had befallen them.

At best she realised that they were abandoned in the wilderness, she and Gilbert, with a wounded man and a child to take care of, abandoned with no food, save the few handfuls of parched corn that she bore in her wallet, no covering save their mantles, no means of defence, save Gilbert's fowling-piece. Hopeless enough, at best! But at worst— She shuddered. What if the tawnies, grown hostile, now that Gerritt's strong hand was removed, should return to attack them?

Resolutely, then, Blithe took herself in hand. As she had often done in the past weeks, she told herself that she must not go peering too deep into the troubled future. She hushed Kitt, with words of comfort, while she bruised a little of the

precious corn between two stones. Then she quickly shaped a vessel of bark, and fetched water from the sullen stream, with which she mixed the corn into a little cake, and set it to bake upon a flat stone.

By that time Gilbert had come back with the fowling-piece, that was once Seth Bicknell's, and together they went about the task, which they knew quite hopeless, of relieving Gerritt's pain. Piteously little they could do, but, while Kitt ate her cake, they made a shelter of boughs, open only on the side toward the fire, that should screen him from the wind. They heaped boughs for warmth about him, and raised his head a little.

Roused by their ministrations, Gerritt opened eyes that were filmed with pain.

"Water!" he begged.

That, at least, they could give him.

Refreshed by the draught, he mustered voice to ask:

"I fell?"

"A cruel fall," Blithe answered.

"Nay," said he. "I am in little pain, only I feel as 'twere all smitten away below my chest." Then, as he spoke, a fuller realisation deepened in his glazed eyes. "Belike I have my death stroke," he said. "Ay, that is it."

Suddenly his eyes cleared. He tried to lift his head, and he spoke like himself.

"Wequash! I must have speech with him. No tricks, when I am gone. He must guide you to the whites on Piscataquay. He shall have two guns, and a curtle-axe thereto. Ay, and a coat of scarlet. Bring him hither. I have no time to waste. Where is Wequash?"

In the firelight he read the despondent faces of the boy and the girl who knelt beside him.

"Gone?" he whispered, and at the silence which answered his question, the last flicker of his strength seemed to go from him.

"I am dying," he muttered, "and the tawnies are fled. 'Tis winter, and the plantations are far. Poor babes i' the wood! Poor babes! God help you now."

Gilbert clenched his hands and set his jaw, with his eyes fixed before him, but Blithe clasped her hands, and looked beyond the jeering firelight, up to the distant stars.

"For Kitt's sake," she whispered, "perhaps God in His mercy will."

CHAPTER XXVII

BY THE CAMP FIRE

WHAT the morning should bring, who could say? For the present, while Gerritt lay in a stupor, from which they could only hope that in mercy he might never wake, and while Kitt slept the sleep of weary and care-free childhood, Gilbert and Blithe agreed to tend the fire, turn and turn about, and do for Gerritt the pitiably little that they could do.

Like true comrades they drew lots, and it was Blithe's fortune to sleep first. She held Kitt fast in her arms, for the sake of warmth that should help them both. At the feet of the dying man they lay, that they also might be screened by the little shelter of boughs. Thus circumstanced, Blithe slept almost as heavily as Kitt herself.

She wakened at the touch of Gilbert's hand. She yielded her place to him, and rose to stand her watch. She saw that the sky was now thickly seeded with stars that were keen and frosty. To rouse herself, she fetched more wood, and

mended the fire. Then she hugged the blaze, shivering, while she waited for the dawn.

Almost at her elbow lay Gerritt. Fascinated, and against her will, she looked at his agonised, dumb face. Beneath his closed eyelids were dark shadows. Already his cheeks seemed hollowed. In the firelight the death-sweat glistened on his forehead.

Helpless, yearning to be of service, Blithe watched beside him. She thought of old days in Crocker's Lane, and of the roguish elder lad, who had stood her friend. She thought of days in Boston, and the hope that the lad, grown man, had held out to her. She thought of days in the forest, and the tenderness and care that he had bestowed on her. Only good, she felt in that hour, had she ever had from this man who lay dying. She sensed that her heart was swelling with gratitude and with sorrow that now in his extremity she could not serve him.

"O Gerritt! Gerritt!" she murmured, hardly knowing that she spoke his name.

The wan eyes opened, and for a second looked upon her.

"Little coz!" he said.

Then again, and for a long while, he lay quiet, with closed eyes, yet all the time his spirit, in the paths of delirium, must have followed an

impulse that the sight of her had given. For presently he began to mutter of Crocker's Lane.

"Nay, granny! Have no fear, granny!" The words shaped themselves, though so faintly that Blithe must bend close to hear. "Phil's girl. I'll ever stand her friend. A good lad, Phil. Mine uncle, Phil. How should I fail mine uncle's little Blithe? A brave little wench, even as Phil, her father."

Blithe pressed her hands, tight locked, against her breast, where she felt that her heart was freezing. Slowly she had come to realise the import of the muttered words.

"Gerritt!" In spite of herself the words came. "Oh, what dost say? O Gerritt! Thou art raving."

He opened his eyes, bright and sunken, and wavering from her eyes that besought him.

"Seest thou, coz," he spoke, with the ghastly shadow of his old jauntiness, "if thou keep silent, all shall be well. And wherefore not? Who is wronged thereby? For the lady's child is dead, and Blithe is a good lass, ay, and shrewd. She can carry it, granny, no fear. I have done well for Phil's girl, even as I swore to do."

Then he fell to muttering old thievish words of old thievish works, while Blithe looked dumbly to the stars, and saw them very far away.

In delirium she knew that the young man had spoken, but in delirium—oh, what dreadful truth was this that he had uttered? "Phil's girl. Mine uncle's Blithe!" If only she had dreamed those words!

"Gerritt!" She took his ice-cold hand in hers. "Oh, prithee, Gerritt! For every sake! Be for one moment thyself, and speak to me fairly. O Gerritt! Tell me once the truth, and let the truth be what I long to hear!"

Beside herself, she besought that dumb face, with murmured prayers and with tears. Under the leaping firelight she saw that face sharpen and fall away with pain, as the hours wore on, pain so dire that for shame she must hush her entreaties. What did it matter whether she were child of Phil McBride, or of another? What did anything matter, except that Gerritt should in mercy be released from his pain?

Toward the last she held his racked body in her arms. She had a strange sense as if in that chill hour of the night the world had dropped from about them. Only she and Gerritt were left, and he knew something that she had once been very eager to know, but now it did not greatly matter.

So when at last—and at the very last—his eyes opened, sane eyes, but darkened with a great ter-

ror of the unknown, she said nothing of herself.

"Nay, Gerritt, be not feared," she comforted. "I am here beside thee. Be not feared! 'Tis Blithe, thy little coz that loveth thee."

"Better so—than to—¹ trine the cheates," he whispered, with effort. "Blithe—toward thee—all for the best—I did."

"I know," she said. "I know. Fret not thyself for me, dear Gerritt. All shall yet be well."

"Brave heart!" he whispered. "Good Blithe, and fairly named."

His eyes closed. For a moment she thought him already gone. Yet once again, though feebly, his blue lips shaped words that she must bend low to hear:

"In the ² dark-mans," he lapsed with dying breath into the jargon of Crocker's Lane, "we will to the ³ dewse-a-vile—"

With such words the soul of the prigger of prancers passed to a country that is far indeed.

¹ Hang.

² Night.

³ Country.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ELEVENTH HOUR

WHEN the first streaks of daylight came groping into the rock-bound gorge, Blithe rose from the place where she crouched beside the camp fire. Softly, in order not to waken Kitt, who slept like a cherub, within arm's reach of the dead, she jogged Gilbert's shoulder, and bade him rise.

He sat up alertly, and with his eyes asked a question.

"Nay, he parted two hours ago," Blithe spoke wearily.

"Rest him!" Gilbert breathed.

"What can we do?" she asked. "The ground is frozen hard."

Little enough they could do. They merely shifted Kitt, who still slept soundly. Then they heaped the boughs that had been a shelter to him, living, over Gerritt, dead. So far as might be, they weighted the boughs with stones, which they fetched from the side of the stream. But

long before they had fetched enough to satisfy Blithe, Gilbert said that they must give over.

"We have hard marches before us," he said tersely. "The living are to think of, rather than the death."

Angrily Blithe would have thrust him aside and gone back to the task, but at that moment she heard Kitt, who had just waked, begin to whimper. Yes, Gilbert was right, she had to admit. Not the dead man concerned them now, but the living child.

Hastily they shared a little of the bruised corn and a draught of water. While they ate, they reviewed the situation, and found it desperate enough.

Why Wequash and his mates had abandoned them in their need, Blithe and Gilbert never were to know for sure. Later they agreed that the savages might have acted on an impulse of superstitious terror, beyond the fathoming of white men's minds, and in that terror have held the prospect of reward as nothing beside the perils of encountering the angered spirit that watched over the gorge. At the time, however, Blithe and Gilbert feared that their treacherous allies might even return to attack them. And if they escaped death at the hands of their late comrades, how should they win through the perils of cold

and famine and savage beasts that lurked along the untracked way that they must follow to the settlements of the white men?

Brave young souls, both of them, they did not waste much time in putting their fears into words. Merely Blithe said:

"With care we have food that should last us for three days."

To which Gilbert answered:

"'Twas in three days Gerritt held that we should reach the eastern plantations. Southward and eastward we must steer our course. Let's about it."

"Ay," said Blithe, and rose. "At least," she said, "let's be thankful we are no longer burdened with monstrous heavy packs."

Thus with a jest at their bitter necessity they took up their march.

Even in later years, when she told over the story of her wanderings, Blithe was not quite clear as to just what happened in those ensuing days that were the hardest of all her days in the forest. Not only was she cold and hungry and in great fear for her life, which was little, and the life of the child that she guarded, which was much, but she seemed to have left something behind with Gerritt McBride's dead body, in the gorge of disaster, something with which through all the haz-

ards of fortune she had hitherto kept up her courage.

"I am no child of the Mayhews," she phrased the feeling to herself. "Whether I bear me well or ill, mattereth nothing. I am but Blithe of Crocker's Lane, and Kitt no cousin of mine, but my mistress's child, and I to serve all the days of my life, and scarce fit even to serve. Blithe McBride, come of thieves, and to end as a thief!"

But all the time, as if by habit, she plodded courageously forward, and cheered her companions, and spoke of the hour when they should reach the settlements, and all should yet be well.

The three days allotted for their journey stretched to seven. They could travel but slowly, half-grown lad and lass as they were, with the heavy child to carry. They were delayed by a fall of snow. They lost their bearings on a day of cloud, and wandered aimlessly. To seven days their journey stretched, and their poor three days' provisions stretched with the days to nothing. They chewed bark, Gilbert and Blithe, and gave the little last of the corn to Kitt. One day they stumbled on a chipmunk's horde of nuts. Another day Gilbert by good fortune shot a rabbit.

At night, when she lay coldly by the camp fire, Blithe dreamed of food—great smoking

chines of beef, and shoulders of brawn, dishes of stewed squash, such as she had tasted at the Bicknells', loaves of bread, crisp and delicious smelling. She saw the food, and smelled it, and she waked to hear Kitt whimper in her arms for hunger.

On the seventh night she dreamed that she sat in the dark chamber in Crocker's Lane, with a bowl of porridge on her knee, and her old granny, passing by, stopped to stroke her hair, and gave her a cake of gilt gingerbread.

"For a good lass," said Granny McBride.

Blithe woke under the cold stars, and felt that she was weak, but no longer hungry. She lay thinking of the old grandmother, and then, very dimly, because she found it hard to range her thoughts in order, she remembered how, on Windmill Hill, they had spoken of that grandmother, old Jane Dantry, as a loyal, good, and upright soul.

"Though I be no Mayhew," thought Blithe, "still I can go forward to the end."

All the next day she plodded through the snow, with a feeling that she had little to do with her limbs that lagged and her feet that stumbled. She seemed no more of herself than a brain that at moments was very clear. In one such moment—mid-afternoon, she deemed it,

and the shadows purple on the snow—she spoke to Gilbert, who trudged before her.

"Gilbert!" she said.

He halted, but, as if he begrudged even the effort that he must make in turning, he spoke across his shoulder.

"Ay, Blithe!"

"Wherefore?" said she. "Kitt cannot walk farther, nor can we bear her."

"We cannot leave her," he said.

"We need not both to perish," she answered. "The child is naught to thee. Go on, and leave us. Haply alone thou mayst reach the plantations and be safe."

Gilbert turned then. On his cheeks she saw that sudden tears were frozen.

"Blithe," he spoke with effort, "aboard the *Trial*, I was a boy. At Saybury, too, a boy and weak. But now I grow to be a man. Thou dost wrong me, Blithe. I do protest thou dost wrong me."

"An we hold together—" she faltered.

"Then must we die all three together," he said, and trudged on.

In his footsteps she wavered forward. Once and twice she helped the stumbling child to rise. Then Gilbert handed her the fowling-piece, and took his turn with Kitt. The shadows now were

so lengthened that only on the hilltops was there sunlight. Then Kitt fell down in the snow, and they had neither of them the strength to lift her.

"We camp here," said Gilbert.

"Then we never go forward again," Blithe answered him. She crouched by the child, and drew her mantle round them both.

"It cannot be far," Gilbert repeated. "Ger-ritt said three days. We have travelled seven. I vow I have kept the trail as he bade. Blithe! Dear Blithe! Canst not rise?"

"Ay," she said. "But we cannot bear Kitt."

Then the boy made a man's decision, such as many a boy in his age had to make. Without words wasted, he knelt and slowly and weakly delved a hollow in the snow.

"I cannot miss the spot," he said. "That tall pine yonder on the hill, with the riven top, and the ledge faced with white rock are land-marks. Trust me, Blithe! Do but lie here and hold the child warm. I'll build a fire, and leave the piece with thee. Then I will go forward to seek help. For it cannot now be far."

"Best so," she said. She scarcely believed his words. But she longed to lie and rest.

Like one half dazed she feebly moved and helped him to fetch firewood. Presently she snuggled by the low blaze, with Kitt, half con-

scious, in her arms, while she watched the boy's slight figure go stumbling down the hillside into the shadows that reached out and clutched him to them.

"He will not come again," thought Blithe. "He will die on the trail, and I shall die here, and Kitt with me, and Mistress Winwood never will know how hard I tried—how hard! And ever will they hold me thief, but thief I am not, whatever were my kin."

The fire sank lower, but she had no strength to mend it. She burrowed into the snow, and held Kitt close, with the deerskin mantle wrapped about them both. The stars came out, and a moon that was round and cold and unpitying. Kitt stirred and whimpered, and once cried aloud. At that sound Blithe, upon the edge of dreamless sleep, struggled back to life. For dread of prowling beasts that the sharp cry might bring, she must hush the child.

"There, there!" she crooned. "Kitt mustn't cry. Only listen, sweeting! Be good, and thy mother presently shall come—oh, yes, in a chariot of gold, and she'll bring Kitt cakes upon a golden dish that shineth like the sun, and we shall play in a garden, where apricocks and roses grow, and the sun ever shineth!"

"Mammy! Mammy!" moaned the child.

"Oh, yes, she cometh," Blithe repeated, "and my granny cometh, too, wi' crowns o' gold, and sweetmeats, and there shall be no more cold, nor any crying."

Then she saw a light that was not moonlight, nor yet cold starlight, gleam right above her, but she knew that she was still dreaming, for how, except in a dream, should she see the faces of Jerad Bicknell, and of Captain Cleaves, there amid the faces that were strange, but kind? Then Gilbert's face, all white and working, she saw, too, and so she dreamed that all their troubles were at an end, and so good she found the dream that she prayed that she might never wake.



CHAPTER XXIX

AT THE BLOCK-HOUSE

BLITHE'S dream broke into a score of fragments that she never rightly was able to piece together. Tingle of snow, with which her hands and face were rubbed, strongly and pitilessly. Voices far off that seemed to promise cheer and comfort. A trail through moonlit snow that wavered up and down beneath her feet like billows. Strong arms of a man that cradled her at last. Black boughs of pines that swayed, and beyond the boughs, the stars.

Strangely, then, there was light from burning candle-wood, and from a fire that blazed upon a hearth. So unusual a sight a hearth-fire had become to her, that she was for a second broad awake. She saw the walls of a room, and a low ceiling that pressed upon her, and the faces of white women, who were busied about her. She sensed that she was being laid between sheets, and that a bolster was beneath her head.

"Kitt! Where's Kitt?" she prayed, and would not be silent, till a woman in a white curch came

to the bedside, and showed her the child, who lay slumbering in her arms.

Blithe folded her aching hands upon her breast.

"Now may I sleep!" she breathed.

She slept for hours and for hours. Once or twice she roused fretfully and drank a draught that was pressed upon her, and whispered Kitt's name, and, reassured, slept again. But at last she really woke, and saw grey daylight in the room where the fire burned, and past the tiny panes of the windows saw snow-flakes whirling in mad eddies. For a time she watched them, fascinated. Then she remembered how the drifts would be heaped in the forest, and how little it was that had kept them from shrouding a dead girl, with a dead child wrapped in her frozen arms. Remembering, she began to shiver, even in that warm room, beneath heaped coverlets.

She was glad when the door opened, and a comely woman in a white curch, with a big blue apron over her homespun gown, came briskly into the room.

"Art waking, Blithe McBride?" the woman asked, with a smile.

"Ye know my name?" Blithe said, in some surprise.

"Yea, all Dover doth know it," the woman answered, "for as brave a lass as these eastern parts

may boast. Nay, no witchcraft helped me to the knowledge, child. The lad, Gilbert Vaughan, hath been able to tell your names and somewhat of your story, and the rest hath Captain Cleaves set forth, and we have pieced both together."

Then the woman propped Blithe up with a bolster, and helped her to smooth her hair that was rough with long lying. While she made Blithe comfortable, she told her that it was in the block-house at Dover that she rested, and she told her that she was herself Goodwife Joanna Bracket, the wife of Sergeant Bracket, in command at the block-house, and very glad to be hostess of a brave lass, who had come safe from so hard an adventure.

"And now," said Goodwife Bracket, "if thou art not wearied, wilt speak a word with one who is fain to speak with thee?"

"Is't Kitt?" asked Blithe.

"Nay, the dear little one sleepeth this hour, in my sister's tendance, who hath cared for her since her coming, and scarce will let her from her sight."

"Is't Gilbert, then?" Blithe questioned.

"Nay, Goodman Seavey, at whose house he lieth, willeth not that young Vaughan walk forth for yet another day. Sorely frost-nipped was his right foot, poor lad, yet did he say naught thereof,

lest he be stayed, and not suffered return with the men to seek you, for he was well assured that without him they would never find you."

Blithe smiled, with tear-dimmed eyes. How good it was that all the world should see and say what she had always believed, that Gilbert was indeed a lad of courage!

"Who is't then," she asked presently, "would speak wi' me?"

"Didst know one, haply, by name of Jerad Bicknell?"

"Oh!" cried Blithe. "Then I did not dream his face. Oh, let me see him straightway!"

Yet so little could she imagine how Jerad Bicknell should be here at Dover, that she doubted if indeed she was to see him, until she beheld him seated at her bedside, and felt the hard pressure with which he wrung her hand.

"Said I not, Blithe, thou shouldst have been a lad?" he chuckled. "How had a lad done better than thou? And now I know where went Seth's fowling-piece!"

"But I know naught of aught," she said, almost fretfully. "Why art thou here, Jerad, and not in Saybury?"

"Why," Jerad answered, "because I had struck no roots in Saybury soil." Then he forbore to tease her, for indeed he saw her very weak and

unlike herself. "'Tis a long tale," he said, "but belike thou'lt find matter in it. Thou hast not forgot my cousin, Delia Sedgwick?"

"Nay," Blithe answered. "'Tis not likely, ever."

"Nor will others," he said, with a frown. "Tale-bearers, they are always false and cowards, be they girls or boys. Wilt believe it, Blithe, that day thou didst flee from the constable's ward, Delia never came to our house till nightfall. Then she crept in, all bedraggled, with a bruised face, and told how thou hadst sprung upon her in the wood, and snatched up Kitt, and beat her, when she went to save the child, and fled away with her into the forest."

"Oh!" cried Blithe, a-quiver with indignation. "And ye all believed her?"

"It seemed not altogether unlikely," he admitted honestly. "But my cousin, Mistress Winwood, that is at most times so mild, thou shouldst have seen her, Blithe. Up she rose from her sick bed, and saith she: 'Nay, I know Blithe, and thee, too, Delia, well I know. Tell me now the truth! The truth!' And with her hands on Delia's shoulders, she had it from her, though it came as 'twere Delia's very heart she plucked away.

"Then we knew how the tawnies had seized

Kitt, and thou, like thyself, hadst sped after them into the forest, and my father and the constable roused men to go in pursuit. But by then 'twas midnight, and no hope to follow the trail till day. Nigh eighteen precious hours we lost, all thanks to Delia Sedgwick, and little profit we found in following a cold trail. We came back to Saybury, baffled. Yes, I was with the men," he proudly explained. "Then we were all hopeless, all save Mistress Winwood, my cousin. 'For,' saith she, 'Blithe is with my baby, and Blithe I know. She will care for Kitt, and somehow bring her safe to me again.' "

At those words Blithe saw the firelight suddenly go misty. She was shamed to the heart to do so, and before Jerad, too, but she could not help wiping her eyes with a corner of the sheet.

"Heed me not!" she whimpered. "Go on! Go on!"

"Well," said Jerad, "then came mine Uncle Mayhew from Boston, and with him Captain Roger Cleaves. He saith very kindly he will undertake the search, nor rest till he find Kitt, so good a friend is he to all the Mayhews. Then mine Uncle Mayhew taketh my cousin, Mistress Winwood, and Delia Sedgwick, and no tears over Delia's going, thou mayst be sure, and conveyeth them back to Boston.

"But Captain Cleaves bideth for a space and rangeth the wood, with chosen men, and suffereth me be with him. And then saith he, 'twere better shift the search eastward, and even send messengers unto the French settlements to northward, with promises of ransom. And when he goeth from Saybury, I pray to go with him, and my father giveth leave. So I have been with Captain Cleaves these weeks of search, and we have been unto the French, and now for the second time we are in the eastern parts, for we heard a rumour of white captives 'mongst the Pawtuckets, and so we hastened unto Dover, and by happy chance came hither the very night when Gilbert Vaughan cometh reeling down the trail, and crieth for succour." His boyish face grew sober. "I think 'tis as Elder Torrey saith in meeting: The hand of the Lord hath led us all."

"Yea, truly," Blithe answered, with an April weather face of content.

"And now," said Jerad, "we will go unto Boston, so soon as the storm is past, and thou'lt lay Kitt in her mother's arms, even as Mistress Winwood hath believed thou wouldst do, and all be well with us all."

Blithe looked at him, smiling, and then she sighed. She did not put into words the question

that this young boy had no power to answer. But in her heart she cried:

"Shall all be well? But what then of Gilbert Vaughan, that is fugitive from Massachusetts? What of poor Gilbert?"

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE EDGE OF THE WOOD

“WHAT of Gilbert? What of Gilbert?” The question rang in Blithe’s head, through the days while she lay, tenderly cared for, at the block-house, and got back her strength.

“I must speak with Gilbert Vaughan,” she said, more than once, but she could not go to him, nor could he, because of his crippled foot, come to her.

Jerad Bicknell, however, came every day to cheer Blithe, with his chatter of Saybury doings and the incidents of the long search, and Captain Cleaves, the tall, keen-eyed soldier, presently came, too.

The first day, when the Captain spoke with Blithe, he found her alone, propped in a great chair. He took her hand, and smiling upon her, like an elder brother, bent and kissed her forehead.

“My good Blithe!” said he. “I am so much thy debtor.”

“Why, sir,” she answered bluntly, in her be-

wilderment, "I have done naught for you, though indeed my will were good. I have but tended Kitt, and she is no kin to you."

He laughed outright.

"No, not yet," said he. "But that may be amended, and speedily. Were not the little rogue the better for a father?"

"Oh!" cried Blithe, and reddened to the forehead. "I have been, I think, sand-blind."

For why should not Mistress Winwood, well on the hither side of thirty, take another mate? And whom should she find, better than gallant Roger Cleaves, her old playfellow? And how should any one be so stupid as to believe that a busy man would leave all his affairs at odd and even, to trace up and down the world after a child that had no dearer claim upon him than that of being grandchild of his friend?

"Hadst thou not suspected?" asked Captain Cleaves. "Nay, why should thy young thoughts run on such matters, and thou no backstair gossip, I'll be sworn. Even as a lad I loved sweet Mistress Cicely, and I saw her wedded with another, mine elder. But on her coming again into our land, I pressed my suit once more, and not altogether hopeless, till the heavy loss of the little child. Then Mistress Cicely vowed that never would she think of marriage, till the child were



restored to her, but further she said that when I brought the child to her, I need never go from her again. So thou seest, Blithe, how everything hung for me, on the recovery of little Kitt, and wherefore I am so beholden to thee."

Blithe could not doubt the sincerity with which the Captain spoke. She knew that he was indeed her friend. She had it on her tongue to pray him then, for her sake, to stand friend to Gilbert, but she kept back the words. On the same false instinct on which she had refrained from appealing to the Bicknells, in Gilbert's time of need, she hesitated now to confide even in the honest Captain.

"What of Gilbert?" she kept the question to herself.

Not until the fourth day was Blithe pronounced by the women able to go out of doors. Feverishly eager, with a purpose that she told to none, she went out into the sunlight that glistened on the white drifts that heaped the paths of the little settlement. She was warmly clad in garments that replaced those in which she had fled from Saybury, that had been worn almost to rags in the forest. The gown and the scarlet cloak Captain Cleaves had bought for her, but the fine kerchief was the free gift of Goodwife Bracket.

To right and left Blithe smiled and nodded as

she went, to the settlers who, knowing her story, greeted her heartily, and even held her in talk. But to right and left as she glanced, she failed to see the face that she sought. Boldly, then, she turned in at the house that she had learned to be Goodman Seavey's, and there outright she asked for Gilbert Vaughan.

Why, he was forth that hour, the goodwife told her. Had he not come to the block-house?

Sick with foreboding, Blithe turned away, and swiftly, forgetting that she was still weak with the days that she had been house-bound, hurried through the settlement toward the wood. She went on instinct, but the instinct this time was true. As she set her feet to the trail that led through the stubble field, all blanketed with snow, she marked the traces of other feet, and of a staff that had punched round holes. Far across the field she spied a slender figure that was just entering the wood.

"Gilbert! Gilbert Vaughan!" screamed Blithe.

Never in her life had she been more angry, and she betrayed the anger in her cry. Gilbert halted, although grudgingly, and fairly running, she soon came up with him. She saw him white and limping, wrapped to the ears in a warm doublet, and with his fowling-piece beneath his arm.



"What thinkest thou to do?" she demanded.

"That concerneth thee naught at all," he retorted.

"Yea, but it doth," she cried. "Dost thou think I risked all for thee at Saybury, and bore what I have borne, only to see thee cast thyself away, like a mad fool? Thou wast minded to flee back into the forest unto the tawnies, and thou dardest not deny it."

"Nay, I deny it not," he answered savagely. "Thou knowest what will be my fate, if I bide here. Dover lieth in the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts. And for sake of favour and reward some one of all the folk that know my story now will surely betray me to my master from whom I ran. And I tell thee, Blithe, I had liefer die on the trail than back to Joel Diffy."

Blithe laid a hand on his arm.

"Don't!" he spoke, in a voice that wavered, and turned his face away.

"Haply I can reach the tawnies," he said presently.

"Almost," she said softly, "I had liefer thou shouldst die on the trail."

"I thought thee my friend," he reproached her.

"I am," she said. She laid her hand on his. "Come back with me now," she begged, "to the

block-house, and play with Kitt, who calleth for thee."

"And afterward?" he said.

"And afterward," she went on steadily, "come back with us to the Massachusetts, and those on whom I have some claim, I'll beg them stand thy friends."

"Thou wilt not face what I must go to in the Massachusetts," he said.

"Gilbert," she answered, "'tis thou that wilt not face what thou goest to, in not returning to Massachusetts."

"I could go to Aquidnay," he said, "or to the eastern parts."

"Yea, thou couldst wander from place to place," she answered, "even as did Gerritt, a man outcast and suspect. Thou couldst not bear that, Gilbert. Thou 'dst end among the tawnies."

"Not so bad an end," he spoke with bravado.

"For a white man, the worst end possible," she told him.

"Thou speakest as a maid," he sneered.

"I speak as Gerritt spoke," she rebuked him.

"Gerritt?" he questioned, startled.

"Yea," she said. "On that last day, that black last day, he spoke to me solemnly, as never before, and prayed me urge thee back to Massachusetts, to face what may await thee, and clear

thyself, so that in the years to come thou needest fear no man. Over all things he prayed that never thou shouldst cast thy lot in the lodges of the tawnies. Ay, 'twas so he prayed."

Gilbert cast down his eyes, and with his staff made six round sockets in the snow.

"He was a good friend to me, was Gerritt," he said.

"He was my kinsman, and I loved him well," Blithe answered. "O Gilbert, I have seen to what he came, because he had gone against the law, and ever the law was at his heels to hound him. O Gilbert! I cannot bear that it should speed so with thee also. Gilbert!"

"Thou carest indeed," he said gently.

For a moment they stood silent, side by side, in the snow. The sky above them was very blue. Across the white stubble field, a cock crowed in a Dover barn-yard. The homely ways in which they had been bred were there, awaiting them.

"'Twere shame that thou hadst need to seek me, and thou still so weak," said Gilbert, in that older, manlier voice that he had used on the trail. "Come! We'll go back now to Kitt, and to Captain Cleaves."

"And afterward?" she asked.

"Why, whither thou wilt," he said, "good Blithe, mine own true comrade."

CHAPTER XXXI

VOICE OF THE LAW

IT was seven days later that Captain Cleaves, with Blithe and Kitt, Jerad and Gilbert, reached Boston. Eager though he was to restore the lost child to her mother, he dared not make long stages upon the rough Bay Road, in winter weather, with so tender a little traveller in his charge. Yet slowly though he had come, he had the good fortune that they all had hoped for, to come before his good tidings reached the town.

In the early darkness of a December afternoon, they landed at the Mill Point from the Charlestown Ferry, and clambered up the crooked streets that skirted Windmill Hill. Up those familiar streets Blithe hurried at her best speed, until, with the heart choking her throat, she saw the candle-light strike through the little windows of the house that she remembered. A moment later, through the tiny panes she looked into the dwelling room.

There, by the glowing hearth, the gate-legged

table bore a lighted candle. In the circle of pale radiance sat Master Mayhew, who read from the great Bible that lay open before him. Old Nance, half sleeping, and Moll, who yawned, were seated on a form against the wall. Close by sat Mistress Mayhew, with her capable hands folded on her broad lap. Half in shadow sat Mistress Winwood, with her pale face lined with grief, but with her dear eyes full of hope that hurt more than despair.

At sight of her face Blithe caught at the Captain's sleeve.

"Come! Oh, come!" she choked.

Already Jerad Bicknell softly had lifted the latch of the house-door. But as Blithe set foot upon the threshold, Captain Cleaves stopped her.

"Blithe," he whispered, "after all, thou hast the first right. Take little Kitt with thee, for without thee she had ne'er come home."

With Kitt's hand clasped in hers, Blithe softly crossed the narrow passageway to the door of the dwelling room. But even as she pushed the door open, she remembered how shock may kill, and remembering, she screened the child quickly with her cloak.

She had swung the door open. Across the lighted room she saw the faces of the two gentlewomen, who sat opposite her.

"Blithe!" cried Mistress Mayhew. "Be good to us! 'Tis Blithe!"

At the cry Master Mayhew turned in his chair, but before he could rise to his feet, Mistress Winwood had sprung up, swift and brilliant as flame.

"Thou hadst never come," she spoke, loud and clear, and held forth her hands, "not unless—" Blithe threw wide her cloak.

"Mammy!" cried Kitt, and ran to her mother.

Blithe never saw that meeting, for with both hands she hid her face, and for sheer gladness wept. But she heard all about her the tread of feet, the joyous cries of the women, the deeper tones of the men, and the shrill babble of the excited child, till presently she felt herself caught into the arms of Mistress Mayhew, who half shook and half embraced her.

After that there were talk and confusion, until Nance, with such distracted help as Blithe and Moll could lend, had spread the table with the best that pantry and buttery could yield, and they all sat down to supper. Then was the story of Kitt's long wandering told, in something like orderly fashion, and Blithe, to her own dismay, found herself telling much of the tale.

"But 'twas Gilbert, an't like you," she concluded loyally. "Were it not for him, we had

ne'er come home alive. When poor Gerritt left us, 'twas Gilbert did all and planned all and bore all."

"'Twas Blithe herself!" Gilbert for the first time glanced up from his trencher to say.

"Thou art that Gilbert Vaughan whose time was sold to Joel Diffy of Doncaster, is it not so?" said Master Mayhew, with sharp eyes upon the lad.

"Ay, sir," said Gilbert.

"And thou didst flee from thy master?" went on Master Mayhew.

Gilbert nodded. Well could Blithe guess that his throat was too dry for speech.

"So please you, uncle," spoke up Jerad, "'twas to aid Gilbert, Blithe made free wth Seth's fowling-piece, and only for that, since they were known to each other long before on shipboard."

"Said I not so?" cried Mistress Winwood. "So soon as word came how young Vaughan was fled, I knew Blithe was no common thief."

"Art over-fond with thy conjectures," said Mistress Mayhew, but she did not snort. "Yet for once thou didst hit it fairly, niece."

"She did all for me," spoke Gilbert, flushing, in the pause that followed. "I fled from my master that I had smitten, and I was frightened, and I begged her help, so she gave 't. She hath ever

stood my friend, and were 't not for her entreat-
ing I had never come again within your jurisdic-
tion. But now I am come, do with me as ye
will!"

"What should we do with thee?" asked Mas-
ter Mayhew.

"I have found the lad in all ways a good lad,"
struck in Captain Cleaves. "I'll stand his surety."

"No need!" said Master Mayhew. He
turned to the Captain. "Ye have been weeks
from Massachusetts, Roger. Ye know no more
than the lad himself knoweth what here hath
come to light. 'Tis true indeed, as he hath con-
fessed, that he lifted hand against his master, and
then did flee away, and both facts in contraven-
tion of the law of the plantation. But hear the
whole story! This man Diffy was twice before
this brought into our courts, once in '41 and again
in '48, both times on charge of cruelty to dumb
beasts, and that, as ye know, against the Liber-
ties of Massachusetts. He durst not come be-
fore us for the third time on such a charge. Now
it seemeth, by testimony of his own little daugh-
ter Joan, in the presence of Elder Wheelwright
of Doncaster, that Joel Diffy laid brutal hand to
his horse that day in September, whereon this boy
Vaughan struck him—as thou shouldst not have
done," Master Mayhew said to Gilbert, but in a

voice that was exceeding mild. "Then he beat thee, Gilbert, did he not?" he questioned.

The boy nodded.

"Ay, beat him and harshly," went on Master Mayhew, "and locked him in the corn-crib. Then Goodwife Diffy, in mere terror lest the lad be brought as a witness against her husband for his cruelty, set the door wide, as she later confessed, in the hope that he would flee. As thou didst," ended Master Mayhew.

"Ay, truly," Gilbert acknowledged, "but I marvel," he added, "that Goodman Diffy did not retake me."

"No marvel," said Master Mayhew, "only the wretched man's ill conscience. He sought unhelped to recover thee, but durst not call the neighbours to his aid, lest thou be taken with the marks of his blows still upon thee, and bear testimony more ways than one against him."

"For that it was," Mistress Winwood explained to Blithe, who sat beside her, "that no word of Gilbert's flight came unto Saybury. Oh, if it had only come to set thee right in our eyes through those cruel, cruel days!"

Under the table-edge Blithe made bold to press the hand that sought hers.

"'Twas full a week the lad was gone," Master Mayhew resumed his tale, "ere the neighbours

came to mark his absence, and to question Joel Diffy. Soon there was a wild rumour that Diffy had slain his serving-boy, and he was brought before the court to make answer to the charge. Then he told the story, as I here have told it, and brought his wife and child to confirm his saying. But clearing him of the charge of murder, they at the same time helped the boy, for they showed the provocation under which he struck, and therefore, Roger, ye have no need to stand his surety."

Gilbert rose in his place at table.

"How mean ye, sir?" he asked, with face alight.

"Thou hast a friend in the courts themselves," Master Mayhew told him. "My lad, dost thou not understand that under our Massachusetts Liberties we have sought to protect the stranger and the fatherless? Not many years since I myself was of the court that doomed one of our settlers to hang, for that he did neglect a bond-boy so that the lad died. Our Liberties declare that any servant, ill treated, may claim and receive protection of the nearest householder, till the courts may judge his case. Thou hadst no need to flee, Gilbert. In thine absence, without thy testimony taken, only on witness of thy master's wife and child, the courts have freed thee of Diffy's control. Into their own charge have they

taken thee, to place thee next time with a kinder and a better master."

Across the lighted table, circled with friendly faces, Blithe looked at Gilbert, and saw his eyes fill, ere he cast them down.

"Gilbert!" she cried. "Then all is well with thee."

"Surely shall all be well," said Master Mayhew.

Blithe looked at him, for once, with eyes quite unafraid.

"O sir," she said, "but in all my life I never knew the law be aught but cruel."

"My child," Master Mayhew answered, "oft are corruptions found in the law, as in all human things, but remember first was law ordained to fend the weak from wrong. The law doth pardon Gilbert that he smote a man who worked brutality, though it counselleth him not again so to smite. The law shall pardon thee, also, Blithe, for the theft that thou didst mistakenly to help thy friend. But another time, do ye both trust that your elders be kindlier than ye deem."

Blithe humbly bowed her head.

"I will," she promised, with Mistress Winwood's arm about her. "Oh, 'tis so easy now to believe that folk are kind."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TRUTH

BLITHE lay that night in the chamber with Moll, who was full of questions and of wonder. Gladly Blithe talked, keyed high as she was with excitement. Long after Moll slept, she herself lay wide-eyed, and long before dawn she woke, and went the round of thoughts that were weary.

So Mistress Winwood was to wed Captain Cleaves, and they would both be happy. And Gilbert was released from Joel Diffy's harsh control, and with some new, good master would be happy, too. And Jerad would return to Saybury, with a gun of his own, well earned, and a new fowling-piece for Seth, of Master Mayhew's bestowal, the happiest boy alive.

All at once, amid such happiness, Blithe felt herself an outsider and forlorn. Once more she seemed to shiver by a camp fire in a desolate wood, and hear a dying man mutter words that must change the whole face of life that for a little while had seemed to smile upon her.



"Oh, if it were only true, the tale poor Gerritt first set forth to save himself!" she thought. "If I were only kin to these folk, who have made me so kindly welcome!"

Then in the dark, while she figured how her life should run, after this adventure of hers had ceased to be a nine days' wonder, and she had become again a mere bondmaid in the Mayhew household, Blithe saw the face of temptation.

A dying man's words, she knew, had much weight. How if she should go to Master Mayhew, and give him to understand that Gerritt McBride, with his last breath, had confirmed the tale that he first had told on Windmill Hill? She knew enough to know that to confirm or to disprove this tale of Gerritt's was not easy. If his first telling seemed confirmed by him, on his deathbed, who could say what weight it might not carry, to counterbalance whatever Master Mayhew's agent should have learned in London?

Why, she could have a witness to help her, she wildly let her plans range farther. She knew that Gilbert would do for her anything that she might ask. And if he, too, should swear to Master Mayhew that he had heard Gerritt declare in dying that his tale of Blithe's kinship to the Mayhews was a true tale, then who could doubt?

So Blithe played with fire in her lawless

thoughts, in the dark of that December morning. She saw herself the equal of Delia Sedgwick, and able to hold up her head with any maid in all the plantations. She saw her path in life all smooth and sunny.

Then in the dark she felt her cheeks live fire.

"But all the while," she thought, "Gilbert who believeth me true would know me a liar. Ay, he would swear as I should ask, but all his days thereafter he would despise me, or worse, would despise the truth. Nay, I could not, an I dared, for I should be shamed before Gilbert, and he knowing me what I then should be. I could not ask Gilbert's aid. I must do all alone."

All at once the thought flashed through her brain:

"And thou art not shamed to do before Heaven what thou shamest to do before Gilbert Vaughan?"

Then Blithe knew her poor, childish scheme of deceit for the wretched thing that it was, and she put it aside like a toy that was broken and soiled. But she turned in her bed, and she shook the sleepy Moll, and said ruthlessly:

"Waken! I must have some one with whom to speak."

"Wherefore?" grumbled Moll, half roused.

"Because," said Blithe, "I am afraid."



Presently they rose, the two maids, and dressed, in the sulky light of a poor candle-end, and then went down the stair to their tasks. The daylight came, slowly and sanely, and then the sun. The house was awake. Folk went orderly about their business.

"But I was not merely bad," thought Blithe. "I was mad to dream of such a thing."

Jerad and Gilbert, who had grown great friends, had gone out to view, as they said, the town, but in reality to be heroes in the sight of all the lads that they had known of old. Kitt played by the hearth with a corn-cob doll, and a battered porringer, treasures that she had not seen in months. Her mother sat close by, and feasted her eyes upon the child, though she winced a little when Kitt called the doll "pa-poose," and rated it in gibberish of the tawnies.

Blithe paused in the doorway to smile upon Kitt, at which the mother, sensing her near, quickly put out her hand.

"Blithe, child!"

Blithe went and knelt beside her. Quickly Mistress Winwood put an arm about her and kissed her forehead.

"My good, true Blithe!" she said.

That was all. "True!" The word echoed through Blithe's head as she ran away, quickly

and shamefaced, to the tasks into which she was glad to cast herself, in the hope of forgetfulness. "True!" But if she were true, what was it that she owed to Master Mayhew, who had always been just and kind to her? What right had she to let him waste his time in following the blind road that her kinsman's tale, which now she knew to be a false tale, had opened to him?

That thought was with Blithe all the morning, while she laboured and chattered, care-free, it would seem, with Moll or with old Nance. That thought was with her, as she sat at dinner, even while she told herself:

"Now hereafter must my place be ever below the salt."

That thought was with her in the afternoon, as she looked from the window, and saw Captain Cleaves and Mistress Winwood, with Kitt between them, walk slowly up the snowy street, bound to show the rescued child to Mistress Cleaves, the Captain's mother. Moll had gone on an errand, and old Nance drowsed by the kitchen fire. Now, thought Blithe, if ever, was the hour for her to speak with Master Mayhew. Why, of course, she knew now, all the day through she had meant to speak with him.

Quietly, with her mind made up, she went down the stair and into the dwelling room. There at

the desk, from which Gerritt once had filched a purse, Master Mayhew sat with his ledgers. Near the window that looked upon the street sat Mistress Mayhew and plied her knitting needles, while with sharp eyes she watched the world go by. Blithe had not counted on Mistress Mayhew's presence, but she would not for that presence draw back, once she had her mind made up. She halted by the gate-legged table.

"Sir," she said, "an't like you—"

Mistress Mayhew withdrew her eyes from the street. Master Mayhew looked up from his ledgers.

"What wouldst thou, Blithe?" he said.

"To speak with you," she answered. She felt that her voice was trembling.

He, too, had marked the whiteness of her face.

"Take thy time," he bade. "What is it, my girl?"

"Sir," said Blithe, across something like a bundle of sticks in her throat, "I am no child of your sister's." She had her voice now, but somewhat shriller than custom. "Do ye understand me, sir? 'Twas but to save himself poor Gerritt said it. When he lay dying in the forest, he called me his uncle's child, Phil's child, over and over. He told the truth a-dying, and I tell it to you now.

I am not kin to any among you. I am Blithe McBride."

She stopped. From head to foot she was trembling.

Across the dwelling room Master Mayhew exchanged glances with his sister, who rubbed her nose quite smartly with the end of her knitting needle.

"Sit down, my girl," he said abruptly.

Blithe sank upon the nearest stool.

"Art a good child to tell us the truth," he said.

"'Tis her habit," snorted Mistress Mayhew.

Ignoring her, Master Mayhew went on:

"I am glad thou wert moved to tell us, Blithe McBride. But already was this truth thou tellest a matter known unto us all."

CHAPTER XXXIII

HER KINDRED

BLITHE looked up in quick amazement at the last words.

"Yes," Master Mayhew repeated. "Not seven days ago, on the ship *Prudence* from Gravesend, came a long letter from mine agent." From a drawer in the desk he took a great piece of many-folded paper, to which the broken seals still clung. "Canst read?" he asked.

Sadly Blithe shook her head.

"Then I shall set forth the facts to thee," he said. "The content is known to my sister, and to my daughter. I should have made thee aware thereof later, but happily thou hast come first to me with thy tale.

"Thou wilt understand, Blithe," he went on, "'twas no light task mine agent set about, to unravel the happenings of twelve or fourteen years ago. But at least he had now in the house in Crocker's Lane a starting point, and he was fortunate to find the man, Timothy McBride. In prison he was lying, under a heavy charge, and in

return for a little aid bestowed, helped mine agent in all things. His word alone no man would credit, but he could tell the agent in records of what church to seek the writings that we have to trust.

"So now we have the truth, the which that unhappy young man, Gerritt McBride, blended so skilfully with falsehood, for his own saving. My poor sister Elizabeth, the wife of Captain Giles Felton, did indeed come up to London, after her husband's death, and no doubt with intent to seek her kindred at Buckton-le-Grand, who, as Heaven is my witness, would right gladly have made her welcome. Even as Gerritt McBride related, she met in her extremity with Jane Dantry, of old her nurse, and went with her to the house in Crocker's Lane. There was her child born, and there, poor heart, she died, but, my girl, the little child died with her."

Blithe looked up at the speaker, and then looked quickly down. What hope of hers had died in those words!

"Of that there can be no doubt," pursued Master Mayhew. "For mine agent saw the burial record in the little church of Bride in Whitefriars, where we had never dreamed to seek trace of my lost sister. There standeth the record: Elizabeth Felton, a stranger, and Cynthia, her daugh-

ter, three days old. The date is November 17th, and the year 1644.

"But still," he spoke on, "is there mad chap-book chance of infants changed at birth, so mine agent sought farther, with Timothy McBride to direct him. Into the West Country he went, to the village of Tredford in Devon, and there in Tredford church is't fairly recorded how Philip McBride was married in April of 1643 with Margaret Sweetname, and further 'tis recorded that on December 19th of that same year was born to them a daughter, called Blithe-in-Tribulation."

"And that," said Blithe, after a moment, "was surely I."

"Beyond all reasonable doubt," said Master Mayhew.

"And sorry I am that it is so," snapped Mistress Mayhew, and fell ferociously a-knitting.

There was a moment's silence, in which the hearth-fire crackled and the knitting needles clicked.

"Art curious to hear more of thy parents?" Master Mayhew questioned suddenly.

"If't please you!" Blithe said listlessly.

"At Tredford doth their memory still linger," he told her. "Thy father, Philip McBride, was a trooper in the army of Charles Stuart. He



fought on the wrong side, yet seemeth no proof that he was not of good courage. Being wounded in a skirmish, he was tended at the house of Gregory Sweetname, a poor tenant farmer, and married with Sweetname's daughter, somewhat to the disaffection of her kin, who were godly folk, as the name they bestowed on thee in baptism doth prove.

"Recovered of his wound, McBride left Tredford in the mid-summer, and rumour ran that he had forsaken his young wife. Yet she denied and vowed that she knew where to seek him in London, and later, when her father died, she took the few shillings that were her inheritance and her babe, then twelve months old, and set forth, as she said, for London, and never again was seen in those parts. 'Tis clear, however, that she went to her husband's kindred in Crocker's Lane. Already was he slain in battle, according to word of Timothy McBride, whereunto we have of course no confirmation. But that his widow dwelt in Crocker's Lane we may conclude, in that she was buried at Bride's in June of 1645. Now seest thou well what breed of truth and falsehood 'twas that Gerritt McBride did mingle, for the perplexing of us all."

"I see," said Blithe. Faintly she sensed that in her something stirred, not sharp enough for



joy, but presage of a calm happiness that should be hers for all her days. "Tell me—" she hesitated.

"Surely, if I can."

"Is there proof," she hazarded, "that my father was ever a thief?"

"Thou poor child!" said Mistress Mayhew, and then snorted, at her own weakness, perhaps, or in defiance of the world.

"Listen, Blithe," Master Mayhew patiently unfolded, "thy grandmother was Jane Dantry, a servant in my father's house." For a moment only did he hesitate. "Moreover," he added, "Jane Dantry was my second cousin. Ay, Blithe," he met her look, "remotely is Mayhew blood in thee, though known but to my sister and myself, and for that drop of blood, belike, a fleeting resemblance in thee at times to my sister's portrait. 'Twas a woman of Mayhew blood that years ago married beneath her. Jane Dantry was my second cousin, and my father's servant. A sober, honest woman I remember her, but of a high temper. She fixed her heart on a roving pedlar fellow, Jock McBride. She married him in the church at Buckton-le-Grand, and then, after stormy years, and against my father's counsel, she went with him and with her little ones away to London, and so out of our lives."

"But Jane was a good woman and honest," struck in Mistress Mayhew, "and whether the land-leaper she married was ever thief, or worse than idler, we know not. Give the devil his due, brother!"

"That some of Jane's children fell into evil courses is beyond doubt," said Master Mayhew. "But her youngest son Philip was, so far as we know, a brave man, though mistaken in the cause he served, and the girl whom he wedded was an honest country lass."

Blithe lifted her head.

"I am not come of thieves," she said, half to herself, and half to all the world. "And I have left Crocker's Lane behind me now forever." She rose. "I thank you, sir," she said, "and Mistress Mayhew, for all that ye have brought to light. My father was a brave man, and my mother an honest woman."

"Tilly-vally!" snapped Mistress Mayhew. "What need of proof? Any one who was not sand-blind had known those facts for true, but knowing thee. Now, brother," she rose up, "if thou art done with her—"

"Say nothing that thou mayest regret," Master Mayhew checked her quickly, and for once, to amazement, she suffered herself be checked. He,

in his turn, rose as if to end the talk, but still he paused.

"Blithe," he said slowly, measuring his words, "I had been by no means sorry, hadst thou proved to be my sister's child. Remember, thy life long, I am here to stand thy friend."

"And so thou'lt find!" cried Mistress Mayhew, and then was dumb as a fish, while Blithe went from the dwelling room, sorrowful and rejoiced, and altogether bewildered.



CHAPTER XXXIV

THE HEARTH-SIDE

ONLY for a few hours longer was Blithe able to hug to herself the sense of moving in a world of wonders. Then, just as she had foreknown, she found herself settling into a rut of duties, in which, she felt somewhat sadly, she was to go on for years as the Mayhews' serving-wench.

Of course they were very kind, the people in the house on Windmill Hill. But they were very busy. Mistress Winwood was making ready for her marriage. To be sure, she made no great preparations, for such was not the custom among the Puritans, but still she sorted out garments and planned for a sumptuous dinner on the wedding day.

Mistress Mayhew, for her part, was making ready for a venture which was, as she said with a chuckle, almost as great as that which her niece was undertaking. She had actually carried out the plan that she had made on shipboard, and become a proprietor. She had bought herself a lit-

tle house on High Street, and thither she was planning to remove, as soon as Mistress Winwood had become Mistress Cleaves and taken over the rule of her father's house.

Daily Mistress Mayhew wrapped herself in her scarlet cloak and her green whittle, and with a bundle or so waddled off to give some loving touch to the home that should be hers. So happy she looked that Blithe could only wish that she herself might be bidden, just once, to go with her. She was going to miss that broad, blunt gentlewoman, and sorely, she realised, when she lost her from the house on Windmill Hill.

Jerad had gone back to Saybury. By his hand Blithe had sent to his mother as a gift one of the few precious things that she could call her own, the kerchief that she had received from Goodwife Bracket at Dover. She hoped that Goodwife Bicknell, the poor, tired woman, might understand what love and penitence she sent with it.

Gilbert was staying at the house of Captain Cleaves's mother, on Middle Street. Once or twice he had come to Master Mayhew's on an errand, and Blithe had spoken with him. He said, with a twinkle in his eyes, that he hoped in time to have a good master. But Blithe found it harder than usual to smile back.

"Thou must laze abed for a little while and

rest, dear heart," Mistress Winwood counselled her.

"Nay," said Blithe, "I must see you wedded first."

So Blithe helped to scour and polish the house that was already as clean and shining as a new English pin. She helped to bake and brew. On the great day she held Kitt's hand in hers and stood an onlooker, with misted eyes, after the foolish fashion of woman-kind, while Master Mayhew, by right of his office as magistrate, spoke the words that made Roger Cleaves and Cicely Winwood man and wife. After that she helped to serve the tables at the dinner to which all the great ones of Boston came, and then, no slight matter, she helped to clear away the remnants of the feast.

No wonder that Blithe rose next morning weary, and moved heavily, as she helped to set the house in order. After dinner she went out to return some borrowed spoons to Mistress Cleaves in Middle Street and Mistress Throdingham in Spring Lane, near the Winthrop house. The day was cold, and Blithe found the way long.

She turned homeward, tired and discouraged, and in the snowy street whom should she encounter but Delia Sedgwick!

Delia had evidently come out to take the air,

from her kinsfolk's house on Cotton Hill, above the town. She stepped mincingly, in a cloak of green broadcloth, which was lined, as the flapping of the wind revealed, with watered tabby, and on her head she wore a green hood, edged with fur.

"And is this Blithe McBride?" quoth she, as if surprised.

"The same," said Blithe.

"La now!" said Delia. "I had thought to find thee braving it in silks and broideries, after thy wondrous service to the Mayhews, whereof such talk was made. Instead thou goest in cloak of frieze and gown of russet, like any bondwoman."

Of a sudden the smile on Blithe's thin face and in her brown eyes was like the glint of sunshine on amber water.

"Delia," said she, "my time till I be one and twenty is worth three pound sterling in good English gold. I doubt if any man would pay that much to get thy time. Thou art thyself unworthy even to be a bondwoman."

Delia tittered, but she had turned scarlet.

"Go home," said Blithe, still smiling and without heat, "and deck thee in thy silks and thy chain of pearl, so that the little street-boys may make mows at thee as thou dost pass for the empty vanity that is thine all. With all thy braveries thou wilt not forget the blow I dealt thee in the wood,

and how thou well hadst earned it, nor wilt thou forget the silence of the folk in Saybury when they knew thee for the poor thing that thou art."

Delia's colour had faded to dull fallow.

"This hateful land!" she cried. "These cloddish folk! I go hence in the spring. I go back to England. 'Tis not that my kindred send me. I go gladly."

"Ay, do!" said Blithe. "'Tis good riddance for this land. We want no cowards here, such as thy sons would very likely be." She drew her cloak of frieze about her, shunning all contact with Delia's cloak of broadcloth. "Speak not to me again, when next we meet," she bade.

Then she walked on and left Delia, staring like one stunned.

"O me!" thought Blithe, a moment later. "What entered into me then, I marvel? Haply my father, Phil McBride, was not what men call meek."

But in speaking up so stoutly to Delia Sedgwick, she seemed to have used the last of her strength. By the time that she reached Windmill Hill, she walked with lagging step and drooping head. Oh, it was well that Delia could not know how deep her shaft had wounded. A bondswoman, when she had prayed and hoped for something more!

When she entered the dwelling room, she found by the fire Mistress Cleaves, that had been Mistress Winwood.

"Blithe," said she, "wilt thou do something for me?"

"Why, aught," Blithe answered. "Always."

"Wilt carry this bundle unto Mistress Mayhew's house? She will sleep there to-night. And 'tis not heavy."

"Surely I will bear it," said Blithe.

But she could not help thinking: Why did ye not give me the bundle at first, that I need not measure back this long way that I have come?

She feared that something of this grudging thought might show itself in her face, but she judged that it was not so. For Mistress Cleaves suddenly put her hands on her shoulders and kissed her.

"Thou dear, dear child!" she said. "There, go now! Soon and oft we meet again."

"Why, surely," said Blithe, surprised.

With the bundle in her hand, she went out again into the wintry street. The short December afternoon was drawing to a close. As she trudged slowly through the town, she saw here a light and there a light kindle in the houses, and the reflection of fire-glow on the window-panes.

"All these are homes," she thought, "and I, when truth is said, am homeless."

The road was long, and the sunset glow had faded from the sky, when Blithe came at last, with some pauses to ask directions, to the house that was Mistress Mayhew's.

It stood back from the High Street, on the edge of the Sentry Field, quite at the outskirts of the town. It was a little house, of but a story and a half, snugly built of clayboards and roofed with good pine shingles. All about it was a garden, enclosed with palings, and a mulberry tree grew by the door. Neat it looked, and home-like, and through the diamond-panes of the small windows candlelight and firelight gleamed.

As Blithe set foot upon the doorstone, the door was opened. Before her stood Mistress Mayhew, with both her hands outheld.

"Come in!" bade Mistress Mayhew, eagerly. "And art thou home at last?"

Like one in a dream, Blithe entered the well-ordered room that was both kitchen and dwelling room. A great fire blazed on the hearth, and the light was reflected from the pewter on the dresser. Before the fire was a round table, laid for three, and over the fire a kettle of pottage cosily bubbled. On the hearth-rug a big brindled

cat dozed, with one eye on a frolicsome pup, that coaxed her to join him in play.

"Kitt's pup," said Mistress Mayhew, gleefully. "Brother Will careth not for dogs, nor will Nance suffer them in the house. But now have I biding place of mine own, and when Kitt cometh to see us—"

"Us?" repeated Blithe.

"Child," said Mistress Mayhew, "canst not understand? An it be thy will, thou shalt bide here with me—that is, if thou canst bear with a short-tempered old woman."

She turned away and made great ado over stirring the pottage.

Blithe sat down slowly on the settle.

"But," she said; "but—'tis sudden. I cannot understand."

"Canst not understand?" scolded Mistress Mayhew. "Canst not understand, wherefore we should be all beholden unto thee? Canst not understand how I have snivelled like an old fool, because thou wert not my sister's child, as indeed thou shouldst have been! Well, well, that cannot be amended. However, there's Mayhew blood in thee, and I am a Mayhew, and an old woman, and childless."

She stirred the pottage furiously.

"Put off thy cloak," she said, "if thou art content henceforth to stay with me."

"But what of Master Mayhew and Mistress Winwood?" asked Blithe, still bewildered.

"Canst not believe 'twas planned of us all," said Mistress Mayhew, "and my whim to hold it secret, but much ado to accomplish it." She came and sat beside Blithe. "My dear," she said, "I have too much surprised thee. After all, thou'rt but little more than a child. There! There!" She put her arms about Blithe, and with a touch surprisingly gentle smoothed her hair.

"Dry thine eyes," she said presently, "and hear aright the way of it. My brother Will hath given thee thy time. Thou art thine own mistress now, my girl. 'Tis of free will thou stayest with me, as if thou wert indeed my young kinswoman. And be sure when thy time cometh to marry, thou shalt go as well dowered as any maid in the plantations."

Blithe simply looked at the speaker, dumb with amazement.

"Thou'lt find in the little chamber yonder thy bed made ready for thee," went on Mistress Mayhew. "Thy night-gear is in the bundle thou didst bring. And in the chamber a cypress chest, the gift of Captain Cleaves and my niece Cicely, with

garments will last thee for years and gauds enough to turn thy head, were it not, I know, a steady one."

Then between joy at the bright future, bright as any dream, that opened before her, and contrition that ever she had doubted her friends, who overwhelmed her now with their gratitude, there is no knowing what foolish thing Blithe might have said, or Mistress Mayhew, quite misty-eyed, might have answered, had not the pottage at that instant boiled over. Up they both sprang, and laughing repaired the mischief. Then Blithe laid off her cloak, and they set the supper on the table.

"But who is our guest?" asked Blithe, as she noticed the third place that was laid.

"No guest," said Mistress Mayhew, "but of our household. He is fitting some shelves in the chamber above. Do thou but call up the stair!"

Blithe opened the door upon the stairway.

"Supper is set!" she called.

She saw the light of a candle sweep down the stairway, and in the light came a figure descending. She looked again, for she hardly believed her own eyes.

"Gilbert!" she cried.

"Who else should it be?" said Mistress Mayhew, in high satisfaction. "My brother grudgeth that we two women dwell in this house alone, so

on the outskirts of the town, unless we have a man to fend for us."

Gilbert smiled, and squared his shoulders.

"So I have bought Gilbert's time of the courts, till he be one and twenty. And now come, come! Let us to supper ere the pottage cool!"

They seated themselves at the table in the fire-light, they three, strangely brought together and through perils, beneath one roof. Mistress Mayhew said the grace.

"Lo!" she added, "my first meal in a home that I can call mine own, after all the years. My home, and thereto have I got me a good daughter, and it may be a good son. This night I envy no one."

Blithe looked around the firelit room, so full of peace and pleasantness. She looked at Gilbert's resolute and hopeful face. She met good Mistress Mayhew's kindly eyes.

"Nor do I envy any one in all the world," she said, from a full heart.

THE END

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